

THE ROMANCE GROUP

\$1.95

VOL. 3
NO. 36

5 Great Romances

**Never Say
Never**

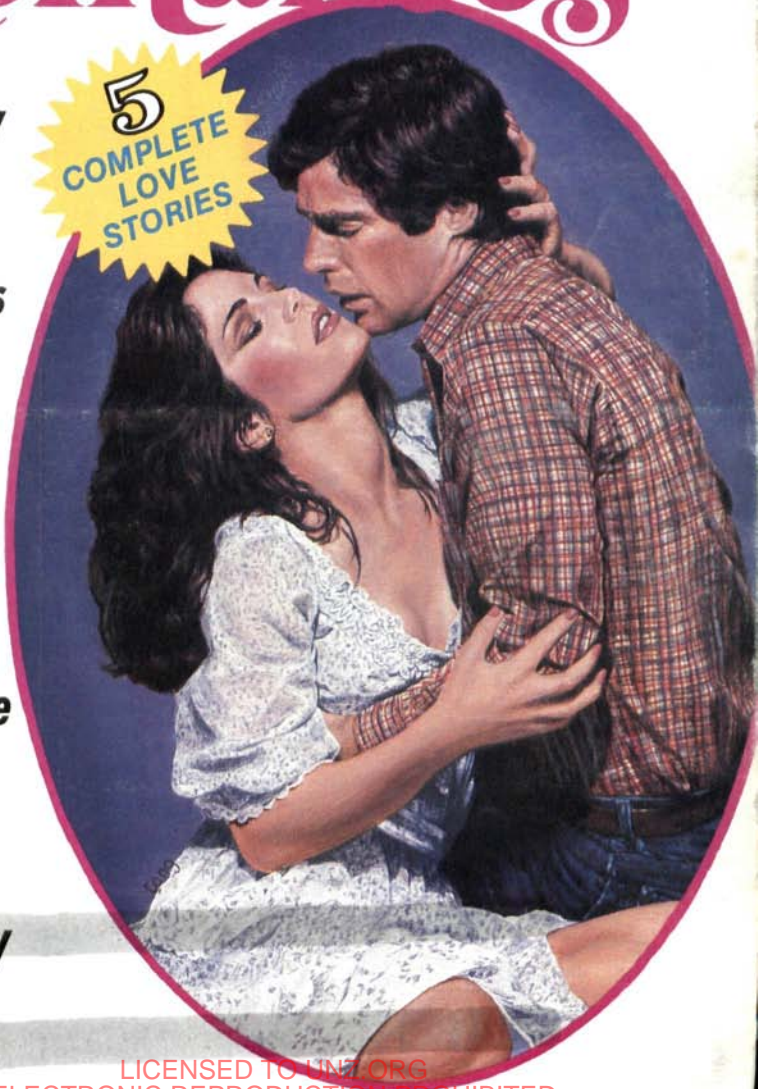
**Rainbow's
End**

**Nights in
Shining
Splendor**

**Moonshine
and
Madness**

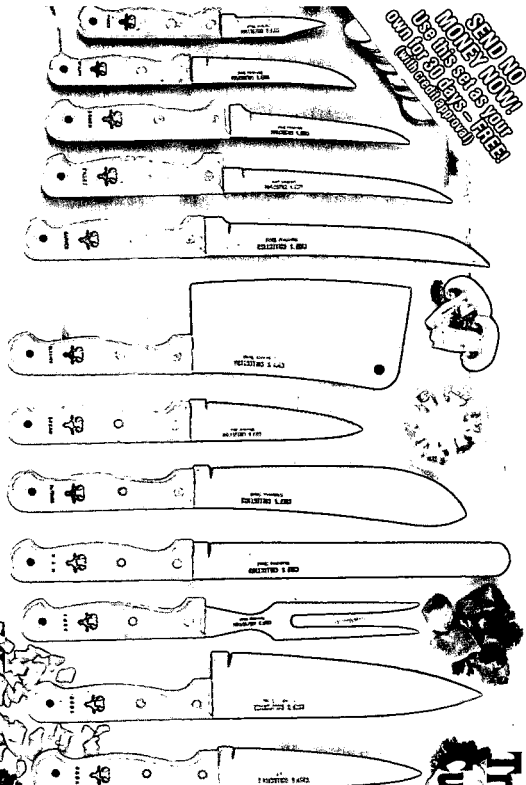
**Conspiracy
of Hearts**

**5
COMPLETE
LOVE
STORIES**



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SEND NO MONEY NOW!
Use this sales plan
and get 30 days FREE!



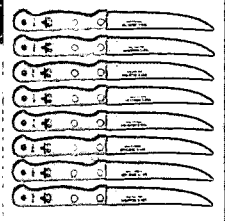
Try this 20-Piece Chef's Collection Cutlery Set in Your Home for 30 DAYS FREE!

(with credit approval)

Then keep the Set
for just

\$20.00*

That's only \$1.00
a piece (when you
buy the set)



- Paring Knife
- Utility Knife
- 6" Cleaver
- 8" Cleaver
- Boning Knife
- Carving Knife
- Butcher Knife
- Cleaver
- Ham Knife
- Serving Fork
- Bread Knife
- Fillet Knife
- 8 Steak Knives

There's a knife that's
right for every cutting job

*plus shipping and handling

Use the entire 20-Piece Chef's Collection as your own for 30 days — Then keep the Collection for the amazing direct-to-you low price of just \$20.00! (plus shipping and handling)

Trim, slice and chop like a gourmet for 30 days!

Go ahead — carve a turkey like an expert...swiftly slice thin pieces of roast or ham...bone and trim meat like a master butcher...chop and mince vegetables, peel apples and potatoes...and more! Yes, you can do it all...free for a full 30 days!

Then own the beautifully-designed set at an amazingly low direct-by-mail price!

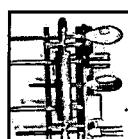
This skillfully crafted Set is a super value with real beechwood handles to enhance any kitchen...and stainless steel blades that resist rust and tarnish.

We reserve the right to substitute similar merchandise of equal or better quality. If substituted merchandise is not acceptable, you can return it postpaid during your free trial period without further obligation.

PLUS 2 FREE GIFTS just for trying the Cutlery

7-Pc. Kitchen Utensil Set

Walmart finish hardwood hanging rack attractively keeps utensils ready for use. From Taiwan, Philippines.



A Surprise Gift



fingerhut
VALUES DIRECT TO YOU FROM
ST. CLOUD, MN 56395



Box 2500
Cutlery made in Taiwan or Japan
©Fingerhut 5-030006-000

30-DAY NO-RISK FREE TRIAL COUPON

2598951 (Free Trial with credit approval)
Fingerhut Corporation, P.O. Box 2500, St. Cloud, MN 56395-2500
Please send me the 20-Pc. Chef's Collection Cutlery Set for my 30 day Free Trial. Send me my 2 Free Gifts, too.

☐ **YES.**

Print Name _____
Address _____ Apt. No. _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Home Phone (____) _____ Date _____
It is my understanding that I am delighted with my Chef's Collection Cutlery Set at the end of my 30 day Free Trial, I agree to pay the cash price of \$20.00 plus shipping and handling (total cash price of \$25.99) in 3 monthly installments of \$8.66 each. Sales or use tax will be added where applicable. I understand that I may return the Cutlery Set at my expense. If I am not completely satisfied at the end of my 30 day Free Trial, the free gifts are mine to keep. This order is subject to approval of my credit by Fingerhut.

Place _____
Sign _____

FILED COPY REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

5 Great Romances

MARCH/APRIL 1989 • VOLUME 7 NO. 2

CONTENTS

NIGHTS IN SHINING SPLENDOR	by Christina Dair	2
CONSPIRACY OF HEARTS	by Pat Dalton	37
RAINBOW'S END	by Carole Buck	61
NEVER SAY NEVER	by Courtney Ryan	89
MOONSHINE AND MADNESS	by Kate Gilbert	114

A digest publication featuring five great romances in every issue . . . each a complete story.

All of the stories that appear in 5 Great Romances have been specially selected for inclusion, and all have been carefully edited so that they retain all of the flavor and meaning of the originals.

In each issue, 5 Great Romances brings to love and romance readers skillfully edited stories packed with all the emotions, thrills, and excitement that have made them so popular.

5 Great Romances (ISSN 0738-0941) is published 5 times a year as follows: Jan/Feb, March/April, May/June/July, Aug/Sept, Oct/Nov/Dec by Digest Publishing, Inc., J. Shapiro, President. Executive and editorial offices at 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. Second Class postage paid at Fort Lee, N.J. and additional mailing offices. Subscription rates U.S. and possessions: 5 issues - \$9.75. Outside the U.S. \$11.00 additional per year. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to 5 Great Romances, 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. For subscription orders, changes of address, correspondence concerning subscriptions, write 5 Great Romances, 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. Please enclose latest address label for quickest service when writing about subscription. Printed in U.S.A. Digest Publishing, Inc., 1986. All rights reserved.

MEMBER



LYNN LAUBER
MANAGING EDITOR

CATHY CARADONNA
ART DIRECTOR

MAY SUGANO-KOTO
DESIGN DIRECTOR

SUSAN MANSFIELD
SUBSCRIPTION
MANAGER

PEGGY POWERS
ADVERTISING
DIRECTOR

Nights in Shining Splendor

Iris McCormick doesn't know how to reconcile her love for Baron Nigel Burke, and her desire to remain a free spirit in control of her own life. But Nigel has no intention of letting her go, and in the end Iris has no alternative but to succumb to his passion.

CHRISTINA DAIR

From NIGHTS IN SHINING SPLENDOR by Christina Dair. Copyright © 1987 by Louzana Kaku. Published by permission of The Berkley Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

When Baron Nigel Burke first saw her, she was like a bright apparition through the misty rain. Watching her march through the gates, he could almost believe that her bobbing yellow umbrella was a larger-than-life dandelion come to set down roots within the disciplined green hedges of Dantley Hall.

"A tourist," Lord Nigel Burke muttered in disgust. "Another bloody tourist!"

Several of his peers had persuaded him that it would be a service to Mother Eng-

land, and her coffers, to open Dantley Hall and its gardens, conveniently located near Stratford-on-Avon, to tourists. And so, on the third weekend of each month, Nigel allowed the dandelions to parade across the grounds.

Pulling his hat down against the light mist, Nigel returned his attention to the task at hand. He had come to the gardens to transfer the small bedding plants from the greenhouse to the ground—and to find that healing solitude he so desperately

T&M DELIVERS!

BUY 2 GET 1 FREE*

ENERGY TABS & CAPS (TO RESTORE MENTAL ALERTNESS)

	CAFFEINE	100 CT	250 CT	500 CT	2 LOTS OF 500 *
4. 357-MAGNUM TAB	200 mg	\$7.00	\$16.00	\$24.00	\$34.00
22. 357 MAGNUM CAP	200 mg	8.00	16.00	24.00	34.00
14. LARGE PINK HEART	200 mg	7.00	14.00	22.00	24.00
2. 30/30 TAB	175 mg	7.00	14.00	23.00	29.00
15. BLACK MOLE CAP	175 mg	8.00	16.00	24.00	34.00
17. WHITE MOLE CAP	150 mg	7.00	14.00	22.00	29.00
11. WHT/BLUE SPEC TAB	150 mg	7.00	14.00	22.00	29.00
3. 20/20 TAB	125 mg	7.00	14.00	22.00	29.00

DIET AIDS PHENYLPROPANOLAMINE (TO CURB THE APPETITE)

	PPA HCL	100 CT	250 CT	500 CT	2 LOTS OF 500 *
18. RED/CLEAR CAPSULE	75 mg	\$8.00	\$16.00	\$25.00	\$35.00
20. 36-24-36 TM CAPSULE	75 mg	8.00	16.00	25.00	35.00
21. 36-24-36 TM CAPLET	75 mg	8.00	16.00	25.00	35.00

BRONCHODILATOR (FOR THE TEMPORARY RELIEF OF PAROXYSMS OF ASTHMA)

	EPHEDRINE HCL	100 CT	250 CT	500 CT	2 LOTS OF 500 *
1. MINI PINK HEART	25 mg	\$7.50	\$14.50	\$17.50	\$25.00
5. THIN OR THICK	25 mg	7.50	14.50	17.50	18.00
19. EPHED 25 CAP	25 mg	8.00	15.00	17.50	25.00

ALSO AVAILABLE

DIPHENHYDRAMINE

	100 CT	500 CT
10. SLEEP AID	50 mg	\$8.50
		\$25.00

T&M DIST DEPT. _____, P.O. Box 228, COUNCIL BLUFFS, IA 51502
CAUTION: INDIVIDUALS UNDER MEDICAL CARE SHOULD CONSULT THEIR PHYSICIAN

NO SALES TO MINORS.

* THIS COMBINATION IS NOT INCLUDED IN THE "BUY 2 GET 1 FREE" OFFER.

1-800-345-3541

IN IOWA (712) 323-0639

HOW TO ORDER:

1. Call toll free and order C.O.D. We ship daily and you pay upon delivery.
2. Take advantage of our Quantity Savings and send your money order with coupon below.

TO: T&M DIST., DEPT. 42 P.O. Box 228, Council Bluffs, IA 51502

BUY 2 GET 1 FREE* • Send your money order (no personal checks)

TO: T&M DIST., DEPT. 42 P.O. Box 228, Council Bluffs, IA 51502

Name _____	QUANTITY	NAME OF PRODUCT	PRICE
Address _____			
City _____			
State _____			
Zip _____		POSTAGE & HANDLING	\$2.90
Age _____		AMOUNT ENCLOSED	

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

needed, for he had foolishly allowed the row he'd had with his father this morning to upset him. His father believed it was high time for Nigel to marry an "acceptable" young woman and produce an heir. After all, he was already thirty-four years old.

Even his dear, dotty Aunt Cecelia was getting into the act. This morning at breakfast, she'd mentioned an expected houseguest, the granddaughter of an old friend, someone she'd gone to school with in Switzerland long ago.

Lost in his own thoughts, Nigel forgot about the tourist until a soft voice said, "Excuse me."

He turned in the direction of the sound, and saw a young woman dressed in blue jeans, a plaid shirt and cowboy boots. Nigel concluded that the young woman was an American. Probably one of those insufferable Texans who wanted to know if the family silver was for sale.

But her face glowed with the sort of beauty that couldn't be painted on and Nigel was forced to question his first impression of the woman. However, it was her eyes that caught his attention. She was no dandelion, he decided. Definitely not! For her dark, dancing eyes called forth images of the irrepressible dark-eyed daisy.

"I'm trying to find Lady Pamela's Garden," Iris McCormick informed the silent gardener as she held out the small guidebook she'd purchased at the gate house.

Glancing from the map in the guidebook into eyes as angry and gray as the clouds above her, Iris wondered what she had done to deserve the scowl—and why such a black look should have set her heart fluttering. She'd never found the saturnine and scowling heroes of gothic tales especially appealing. So why did one angry look from a gardener have her suddenly understanding Lady Chatterley's obsession with her husband's gamekeeper?

With an effort, she forced herself to fo-

cus on the fact that the gardener in question seemed to be as unhappy to see her as she was to be here.

It certainly hadn't been her idea to spend time under leaden skies in gardens that exhibited all the lushness of the Pythagorean theorem. It had all been her grandmother's doing. And only by reminding herself that her promise to visit England in her grandmother's place had persuaded the older woman to remain home, nursing a broken ankle, did Iris manage to stand quietly as the gardener's mouth, already grim, thinned more ominously.

"You might consider following the signs," was the man's curt reply.

Taken aback by his rudeness, Iris watched as he carefully cupped a scrawny plant in his large hands and set it tenderly in the depression he had made. She wondered suddenly—and irrationally—if those fingers would arouse in a woman the same sensual responses that the hands of Lady Chatterley's lover had provoked.

"There are no signs," Iris explained as she dragged her gaze back to the man's striking eyes. "And I've already wasted ten minutes wandering around in this maze you call a garden."

"The maze is on the other side of the hall," the man informed her as he tamped the dirt around the small plant. "And time spent in a garden is never wasted—except to you Americans, who always seem to be in such a bloody hurry. We have more than two hundred years of history, you know." Sitting back on his haunches, he gave her an intense up-and-down look.

Reminding herself that gardeners were as entitled to be snobs as anyone else, Iris abandoned her smile and returned the man's scrutiny. A battered brown felt hat did not completely hide his blond hair, for wisps of his longish locks escaped to curl around his ears and neck.

Gray eyes and blond hair made an ar-

Have love affairs in public.

Dare to be seen with Logan McCade in the supermarket.

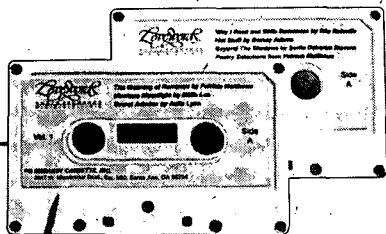
Boldly go home with Aaron Cothrane after work.

Shamelessly cavort with Randy Jensen on the beach.

Once you spend some time with the charming men from LOVEWORDS Romantic Audio Cassettes, you won't want to be without them. And you won't have to be! Your hero can always be close. Wherever you are, LOVEWORDS will give you hours of pleasure in the privacy of your own romantic world. Each richly dramatized audio-cassette has four romantic fantasies that you can enjoy anytime.

So dare to be seen with Logan, Aaron and Randy. You won't care who knows! Order LOVEWORDS now.

Go ahead. Live dangerously.



YES! Please rush me LOVEWORDS Today, With full 30 day money back satisfaction guaranteed.

(Please Print)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____



EMBASSY CASSETTE, INC.
3617 W. MacArthur #500
Santa Ana, CA 92704

LoveWords

☐ Check or Money Order ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Acct. # _____ Exp. _____

_____ Vol. 1 @ \$9.95 ea. \$ _____

_____ Vol. 2 @ \$9.95 ea. \$ _____

_____ Bonus Package vol. 1 & 2 @ \$16.95 ea. \$ _____

Subtotal _____

CA 6% _____

Shipping/Handling \$1.00 per tape _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

resting combination, and, Iris discovered he might be absolutely devastating if he ever learned to smile. She had the feeling he didn't do that often enough. Well, she'd always liked a challenge, so she would do him an unasked-for favor and coax a smile from him—and perhaps prick the man's sense of self-importance just a bit in the process.

"I'm interested in seeing the Weeping Ghost of Dantley Hall," Iris explained, pointing to a picture in the guidebook, one in which a purplish light hovered under a tree. Glancing at her watch, she asked, "Can you tell me what time she materializes?"

He stood up then, revealing a good six feet plus a few inches of masculine indignation.

"My dear young woman," he began, speaking slowly and distinctly as one would to the mentally deficient, "this is not Disneyland. Lady Pamela does not appear on cue like . . . like Minnie Mouse."

Iris ignored the man's indignation, but decided that drawing a smile from him was going to be more difficult than she'd anticipated. Never one to back down, she rushed on.

"Temperamental, is she? Well, perhaps it is hard to weep on cue. I don't suppose you'd have any headless ghosts running around would you?"

"Headless?" the gardener repeated, obviously scandalized by the questions.

Iris nodded. "They're always so much more interesting. Why, I remember one I met in France. He carried his head under one arm, and an empty magnum of champagne under the other," she explained. "He couldn't walk a very straight line—but it didn't matter, since he could glide right through walls. And then there was the ghost I met in Bombay . . ."

Iris stopped her monologue as laughter washed over her in deep, rolling waves. Looking up into gray eyes that sparkled

with merriment, she decided she'd been right: He was absolutely devastating when he smiled.

"You'll find no headless ghosts here," the gardener replied with a shake of his head. "The Burkes and Dantleys have always been a rather conservative lot."

Iris watched, intrigued by the way laughter softened the man's features and gave him an almost boyish appeal.

For his part, Nigel was surprised to find himself caught and held by the American's laughing glance. "Was I being terribly pompous?" he asked.

Her answer was a quick and definite yes, but he found it impossible to be insulted, since she threw him a saucy grin as she said it. He'd never known a guileless smile could be so intriguing. Or that dimples could be so sexy.

"I must apologize for my rudeness," he told her, wondering if she thought him as stilted and stuffy as he sounded to himself. "I'm afraid I had other things on my mind."

Pulling a cloth from his back pocket, he began to wipe the dirt from his hands.

"The entrance to Lady Pamela's Garden is just through that line of yew trees," he said, pointing into the distance.

He watched as she studied where he'd pointed.

"Yes," she finally said. "I see it. Well . . ." She drew the word out, as though unsure of what to say. "Thank you for the directions."

Nigel nodded, and watched as she turned and started toward the gardens. The swaying of her hips was quite inviting. Maybe even her best feature.

"Let me show you around the grounds," he volunteered suddenly, loath to see her go. "They are quite beautiful, really. And this is the best time of year to view them." He caught up with her in four long strides.

"I'd like that," she answered with her usual breathless impulsiveness. "As long

as you promise that I don't have to be inhibited by your concept of reality, I have a habit of seeing ghosts."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Nigel murmured trying to ignore the unaccountable frisson of excitement that her nearness caused. In an effort to deny the quickened pace of his pulse, he concentrated on the gardens around him.

"Although Lady Pamela's Garden was begun in the seventeenth century," he began, "the grounds date back much further than that. We even found traces of a Roman fort in some of our digging."

She glanced quickly up at him. "You've worked here a long time, then?"

He liked her, Nigel discovered to his own surprise. And how would she react, this woman from casteless America, if he told her he was Lord Burke, a baron in his own right,—the future earl of Merrick, and heir to all she surveyed and much, much more? When next she smiled, would it be at the man or his titles? He found himself unwilling to find out.

"I've helped cultivate the flowers since I was a mere lad," he said casually. Her quick smile was reward enough for his evasion of the truth.

And, strolling along the carefully tended pathway, with rain forming a glistening, shimmering curtain that shielded them from the world, it was easy for Nigel to persuade himself to believe that he was simply a man who worked with the soil, and that she . . . she was a beautiful and desirable woman whose guileless eyes reflected something of his own lost innocence.

When they walked through the gate into Lady Pamela's garden, Iris was overwhelmed by the riot of delicate pinks and vivid purples, glorious yellows and sky blues. It seemed as natural and simple as a Monet painting. Yet Monet's paintings, she knew, were anything but simple. This certainly made her task more difficult.

Her mission was to study the best English gardens and to come home with a proposal for transforming a vacant plot of ground adjoining her grandmother's California estate into something approximating a typical English garden—a garden that was to be dedicated to the memory of Iris's mother.

"It's gorgeous," she sighed, realizing that the man beside her still waiting for her reaction. "I've never seen anything like it."

"It is nice, isn't it? Do you do much gardening back home in . . . ?"

"In California," Iris supplied, wondering how she should answer. The truth was that she didn't know a snapdragon from a hollyhock. And the fact that she'd been a hasty, last-minute replacement for her grandmother had precluded her doing the kind of research that might have kept her from looking like a complete idiot during her appointment with Lady Cecelia Dantley—an appointment slated for ten the next morning. Casting a surreptitious glance at the gardener, Iris decided that he just might be a gift from the gods. If she could persuade him to give her a crash course in gardening . . .

"Are you working all day?" she asked, throwing him a grin that again revealed her dimples.

"Why do you ask?"

"I need a crash course in gardening," she admitted, then stopped herself from saying more. She didn't want to set a wall between herself and the handsome gardener by admitting that her grandmother and Lady Dantley were friends, or that she had an appointment with his employer tomorrow.

"I promised my grandmother that I'd tell her all about the flowers," she said. "And I'm afraid I can't even recognize any of them."

"And what is your grandmother interested in?" Nigel inquired.

NOTED ASTROLOGER, JOYCE JILLSON NEEDS 1000 ROMANCE READERS FOR AN IMPORTANT RESEARCH PROJECT!

HER PREDICTIONS HELP LOVE AND WEALTH

She charges \$300 per consultation. Now she will personally prepare your Forecast FOR ONLY \$1.

By Guy Waid

I recently interviewed Joyce Jillson at her luxurious and delightfully informal home in California's exclusive San Fernando Valley. Over a cup of tea, Jillson confided she had recently completed a pilot research program which proved her psychic knowledge and advice brought new wealth and romance to everyone in the program. She showed me letters from those who had joined the project describing wonderful new romances and unexpected wealth! L.J. of Edmonton, Alberta wrote her, "You said

"... following your advice the relationship between me and my boss improved, which allowed for my major career change."

The psychic knowledge and advice of the ages is now available to everyone!

In the past 20 years, the world of astrology has undergone great changes. Now all the math necessary to interpret the charts is done by computer. Jillson tells the students at her Astrological School in Los Angeles that they can now forget about the math and concentrate on the humanity of astrology.

When I asked what had given her the greatest personal satisfaction, Jillson laughed and said that being consulted by Hollywood stars was a "real thrill. But I am most gratified that, through my personalized computer



JOYCE JILLSON Asked constantly to share her knowledge of astrology on Television, Radio and as a daily columnist in over 87 newspapers in North America. She will cast a truly personalized Horoscope—Just for you!



RONALD REAGAN "Jillson insisted that astrology was definitely used in the planning of the summit between the President and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev."—The NY Daily News



NANCY REAGAN "Things didn't go smoothly with the first two ladies, Jillson explained, because Raisa Gorbachev's birth date is unknown and consequently no guiding horoscope could be cast for her."—USA Today

I was going to meet a man. And I met a gentleman on the bus last week."

Win unexpected money from Jillson's predictions!

H.H. in Montreal was very excited. "I won at Bingo: May—\$200, June—\$100, July—\$100. And K.H. in Penticton, British Columbia thanked Jillson,

consultations, anyone can now afford to benefit from the vast science of astrology."

Now, thanks to Joyce Jillson, when you participate in her research project you can receive your own, unique Lucky Numbers, Lucky Days and Lucky Signs!

I read through letters she had received and was amazed

PRESIDENTS AND REVEAL TO HOLLYWOOD STARS!

by how her predictions had meant sudden wealth and new romance to so many people. For instance, J.C. of Black Creek, Wisconsin wrote, "Put my name in lights. I went on a trip to Las Vegas. I taped my Lucky Number in the flap of my purse. I won \$1,111.00!"

Jillson recalls her first encounter with astrology was "love at first sight." She was 14, living in Boston and her mother took her to meet the famous Maude Williams, then the leading astrologer in the U.S. "She was wealthy and lived in great style. I was so impressed by her insight into my teenage problems. She took a liking to me and asked me to be her student, I jumped at the opportunity."

Jillson confided to me, "I went through my own divorce several years ago. I think that was when it really hit me what an important role astrology plays in everyday lives."

Joyce Jillson is consulted by Police Departments.

I was surprised that she had been consulted by various Police Departments. 'From finding lost pets to tracking down desperate criminals, I have proven that astrology is a science that works in the 'real' world!"

Reply today and be one of 1000 readers to get a Personal Forecast prepared by Joyce Jillson herself!

Ms. Jillson asked me to extend her personal invitation to readers to join in her exciting new Astrological research project. She added, "together we will chart unexplored areas of the human mind and personality."

Just fill in and return your Research Project Questionnaire. And you will receive your own Personal Forecast for only \$1! The same advice that public figures and Hollywood stars pay \$300 for! You risk nothing. When there is so much to gain and nothing to lose, wouldn't you be foolish not to participate?

Join Joyce Jillson's Research Project / 248

Thank you for taking part in my research project. Please fill in the Questionnaire completely. When I prepare your Forecast, I want it to be accurate and personal.

Name _____

Address _____ Apt. # _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

My Date of Birth:

Month _____ Day _____ Year _____

**The Time of My Birth _____ AM PM

The Place of My Birth:

City _____

State _____ Country _____

I am ☐ Female ☐ Married ☐ Single

☐ Male ☐ Unmarried, Living Together

☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed

☐ Full Time ☐ Part Time ☐ Seeking Employment

☐ Not Presently Employed Outside The Home
(i.e. Student, Retiree, Housewife)

I have a favorite number. YES NO
☐ Male ☐

I have won a large sum of money. ☐ ☐

I have difficulty keeping to a diet. ☐ ☐

I have passed up great opportunities
that I shouldn't have. ☐ ☐

**If you're not sure of the exact time of your birth, don't worry, an auxiliary Solar Chart will be prepared so the necessary calculations can be performed.

I will personally cast and send your first Personal Forecast—
FOR ONLY \$1 (plus 95¢ Postage and Handling)! My
research will permit me to continue to cast your personal
prediction and Transiting Planets Chart for a nominal fee.
This is my way of thanking you for your participation in this
important psychic research.

Clip And Mail To:

Joyce Jillson Research Project

117 Spencer Plains Rd.

Old Saybrook, CT 06475

*All information will be kept private
and strictly confidential*

"Oh, everything," Iris answered, realizing that he was agreeing to help her. She extended her hand. "My name is Iris. Iris McCormick."

"Nigel," the baron mumbled as he took her hand in his and hoped that she didn't connect the name with that of the Lord Nigel Burke who had written the guide-book she was referring to. "At your service."

"This is two hundred years old?" Iris asked several hours later, as she gazed up at thick grapevines that formed a perfect arch above them. New green leaves blotted out the sky. "It's hard to believe a grapevine could live so long. In America, we think it's wonderful if we can find a building two centuries old, but a plant . . . that's really something." She smiled up at him. "I really do appreciate your taking the time to show these gorgeous grounds to me. You're sure you won't get in trouble on my account?"

"Absolutely," he answered, as his eyes locked on hers and he felt her glance pull at him.

How odd that a pair of guileless brown eyes could have him almost tongue-tied. Could she actually be as open and innocent as she appeared?

"Well, I'd better be leaving. Thanks for taking the time to show me around. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it." She moved reluctantly toward the pale sunlight that defined the edge of the grape arbor.

Nigel watched as she walked away. This afternoon had been special. He couldn't remember being this attracted to a woman since his adolescence, and he didn't want to lose her so soon.

"Don't go," he called after her. Striding toward her, he said, "Share a picnic with me first. Then I'll take you back to wherever it is you are spending the night."

"A picnic? In this weather?" Iris asked

with a relieved laugh. She'd been so afraid he would let her walk away.

"The rain has stopped. Besides, there's a conservatory down by the river. We can eat in there and pretend that it's a beautiful sunny day. What do you say?"

"It sounds wonderful." Wonderfully romantic, she thought.

"Good. Just give me forty-five minutes to get the food together and meet me back at the grape arbor at three-thirty."

Drawing the back of her hand to his lips, Nigel placed a gentle kiss there. "Forty-five minutes," he repeated, then turned and strode toward the back of Dantley Hall.

Nigel was back at the arbor in thirty-five minutes, watching for a glimpse of Iris's jaunty yellow vest. But what if she'd changed her mind? he worried as the minutes passed and there was no sign of her. But just when he was about to set off in search of her, Iris came around the corner and waved at him.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she called as she hurried across the velvety expanse of lawn. Taking both her hands in his and drawing her close to him, he kissed the palm of one hand and then the other. "I was here early. I missed you."

"Missed me?" Iris asked, giddy and slightly breathless. For her, the rest of the world receded. There was only Nigel and the blue sky above them. "But it's only been a few minutes."

"I was afraid you might have changed your mind."

Then his lips were on hers. Gentle as the rain, they whispered too quickly over hers, leaving her wanting more, yet somehow branded by his tenderness.

"Hungry?" he asked in a whisper, his warm breath caressing her cheek.

When Iris nodded ever so slightly, Nigel relinquished one of her hands to pick up the hamper he'd brought along, then

DOCTOR DISCOVERS A PERMANENT PROGRAM FOR OVERWEIGHT PROBLEM!

"I LOST 6½" AROUND MY WAIST DURING THE FIRST WEEK AND 8½" BY THE END OF THE SECOND WEEK!"
"I LOST 28 POUNDS DURING THE FIRST WEEK AND A TOTAL OF 37 BY THE END OF THE SECOND WEEK!"

I GUARANTEE! YOU CAN LOSE 70 POUNDS IN 40 DAYS OR YOUR MONEY BACK!!

NO DOCTOR'S PRESCRIPTION - NO STARVATION DIETS - NO CALORIE COUNTING

NOW YOU CAN EAT ALL YOU WANT WHILE EXTRA WEIGHT DISAPPEARS

"I can hardly believe it myself, but it's true — and now I feel that I want everyone to know my story of how I lost 70 pounds of fat in just 40 days. . . . And to help me lose all this weight I ate all I wanted of Fatty Meats, Bacon, Roast Chicken, Shrimp, Roast Beef and Pork. I used unlimited amounts of Cheese, Butter, all the oil I wanted in Salad Dressings and plenty of Heavy Cream in my Coffee. In fact, I ate all I wanted of every high-calorie food that I like. But what amazed me most was that while I STUFFED MYSELF, EATING AS MUCH AS I WANTED, the fat still kept disappearing from my body. My weight and inches MELTED AWAY DAY BY DAY! And here's the most happy part of it all: After I decided how great I looked and felt at 70 pounds lighter, I stopped the weight loss and have NEVER GAINED BACK EVEN ONE UNWANTED POUND."

I'LL NEVER BE FAT AGAIN

"I used to look at least ten years older, unattractive, but worst of all, any day I expected a heart attack, stroke or diabetes, and decided that this was too serious a problem to expect my family to have to live with. The expense and care would have wiped us all out financially, even if I didn't die from all these diseases."

DISCOVERED BY DOCTOR TO HELP OVERWEIGHT PATIENTS WITHOUT A PRESCRIPTION

"The program I used was discovered by a heart specialist who for years had been searching for an easy, safe and permanent scientific program to get the weight of his patients down to normal — and even more important — to keep it down."

"Yes, if you are in normal health you will be amazed at this World Famous Medical Doctor's program that melts away 30, 60, or even 100 pounds faster and more safely than anything

you've ever tried. After all, who ever heard of a weight reduction program that requires no doctor's prescription and lets you eat high-calorie foods to your heart's content?"

NO SELF-CONTROL NEEDED AS 20-30-60-100 UNWANTED POUNDS & INCHES MELT AWAY

"The program I used has been completely successful on thousands of people just like you and me and I now offer it to the general public by the name of BODI-TRIM. Yes, now there are thousands of healthy, slim, attractive men and women who owe it all to BODI-TRIM."

FASTEST & MOST PERMANENT WEIGHT-LOSS PROGRAM KNOWN

"Simply take one BODI-TRIM tablet each day at breakfast and watch your extra pounds and inches disappear as you follow the BODI-TRIM plan. Yes, BODI-TRIM is without a doubt the most permanent way to lose weight and keep it off. Previously, I must have tried just about everything



I read about or heard about, but this program is based on medical research conducted here and abroad on thousands of overweight people — and due to its safety and fast action it is now available to the general public in this country without a doctor's prescription."

NOTE: Minors must have parental consent.

ABSOLUTELY GUARANTEED AMAZING RESULTS IN 7 DAYS OR A FULL REFUND

"Yes, see for yourself how fast BODI-TRIM will work for you. I'm so certain you'll be delighted."

YOU'LL NEVER BE FAT AGAIN

"Fat-Busters is here to help you lose weight! And keep it off!"

*Individual weight loss may vary.

19893

CUSTOMER'S GUARANTEE

You can eat up to six meals a day. You can lose as much weight as you wish.

You will lose weight faster than ever before.

You will look better than you ever dreamed possible.

IF ALL THE ABOVE ARE NOT TRUE RETURN UNUSED PORTION WITH PROOF OF PURCHASE WITHIN 40 DAYS FOR A FULL REFUND.

Guaranteed By
FAT-BUSTERS, INC.

P.O. Box 218 • Seffner, FL 33584-0218
1-800-777-4711

Copyright © Fat-Busters, Inc. 1988

SHIPPED DISCREETLY

FAT-BUSTERS, INC., Seffner, FL 33584-0218

30 Day Plan Just \$19.95 + \$2.00 Shipping & Handling

60 Day Plan Just \$33.95 + \$3.00 Shipping & Handling

90 Day Plan Just \$44.95 + \$3.00 Shipping & Handling

120 Day Plan Just \$56.95 + \$4.00 Shipping & Handling

Call Now For Fast Delivery — Our Operators Are Standing By 7 Days A Week From 8 A.M. To 12 P.M. E.S.T.

VISA / MASTERCARD WELCOME

CALL TOLL-FREE • ASK FOR OPERATOR

RG3

1-800-777-4711

OR 1-813-654-0210

led her through the arbor, and through a wooden gate to, an ornate circular building perched sedately beside the River Avon.

"Is this the Conservatory?" Iris asked, awed. Nigel nodded, enjoying her bright-eyed enthusiasm. "Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful!" Iris gave up trying to control the breathless quality of her voice. "I've never seen anything quite like it."

Nigel chuckled indulgently. "A whim of one of the more recent earls. Quite humble, really, compared to the more elaborate . . . follies of some of the other noble families."

"I would hardly call this structure humble," Iris murmured. "In fact, I'm beginning to feel underdressed for this affair."

Nigel looked her up and down. "You'll do. Believe me, you'll do," he said, and Iris felt herself blushing.

They took the three wide, curving steps in silence, and then Nigel opened the door and let her precede him into the conservatory.

"How lovely," Iris murmured as she stepped inside. The sunlight, softened by the frosted glass, cast an intimate glow on the room, which was filled with potted trees and brightly colored blossoms. "Like stepping into a world of enchantment."

Nigel set the hamper beside the table, and covered the wicker table with a beautifully embroidered cloth.

"What can I do?" Iris asked.

"You take out the food while I open the wine. I hope you like Orvieto."

"I love it," she murmured.

As Nigel eased the cork out of the bottle, Iris unpacked what turned out to be a luxurious lunch, complete with beautiful china and heavy silverware. Not the sort of picnic you'd expect a gardener to procure, she thought. But before she had time to consider that point, Nigel handed her a glass and raised his own.

"I'd like to propose a toast. To your wonderful grandmother and her passion for flowers," he said, his glance magnetic as he touched the rim of his glass to hers. "After all, she is the one who brought us together."

"And so poor old Grandmother is at home nursing a twisted ankle, and you're enjoying her vacation. Is that it?" Nigel asked her some time later.

Iris smiled and nodded, knowing that he was picturing some sweet little gray-haired lady sitting in a rocker, rather than the tall, angular woman wearing a jogging suit, who was probably hobbling all over the estate, driving her staff crazy.

But she said nothing. She didn't really want to discuss with a stranger her grandmother's iron will, or how Gran had blackmailed her into agreeing to this trip. Besides, she wanted the memorial to her mother just as much as Gran did.

After two years as a politician's wife, Iris had developed a deep and abiding respect for her mother's role as the quiet, self-effacing wife of a dynamic senator from California. While various schools and parks had been dedicated to her father in the seven years since her parents' death in the crash of a small plane, her mother had been almost forgotten. Iris was convinced that the woman had a right to a memorial of her own.

"And if you weren't in Britain, where would you be?"

"Mandy and I had planned to sail down the Amazon. It's a trip I hated to cancel."

"Mandy?"

"Short for Amanda," Iris said, then took another sip of wine as she pondered how to explain. "A traveling companion," she said finally.

How else was she to explain the youthful heroine of a series of children's books that she wrote? Besides, it wasn't really a lie. Since the dissolution of Iris's marriage

ELIMINATES DIETING

Thrilling Japanese Super Tablet Guarantees Rapid Weight-Loss!

There now exists for the first time ever an all natural, bio-active weight-loss compound so powerful, so effective, so relentless in its awesome attack on bulging fatty deposits that it has virtually eliminated the need to diet. News of the super tablet from Japan is sweeping the country. The product is called MAXILITE and its dynamite! In fact, people are now trying MAXILITE and losing weight faster than ever before! Some people have reported as much as 3 pounds the first 24 hours!

FLUSHES CALORIES RIGHT OUT OF YOUR BODY! MAXILITE ingredients, Konjac Root was tested by the JMA (Japanese Medical Association). It contains no drugs whatsoever. Its ingredients are derived solely from Konjac root which grows primarily in Northern Japan.

Why the Konjac root? For years it was widely held belief that the Konjac root had magical properties. When a person ate a small amount of this delicious root he would miraculously lose weight! The JMA investigated this phenomenon and discovered, thru sophisticated testing, that the Konjac root did indeed cause rapid weight-loss. Actually the way it works is truly extraordinary: Shortly after taking small portions of the Konjac root it dissolves into a completely natural gel which surrounds the excess fat, destroying calories and prevents them from forming body fat. This action actually alters the time contact is made with the intestinal membrane!

Princeton Labs was so impressed with Konjac's ability, and the JMA studies that they produced the amazing MAXILITE weight-loss tablet, which use key ingredients of the Konjac root.

EAT ALL YOU CAN AND STILL LOSE WEIGHT (TABLET DOES ALL THE WORK). By now it should be obvious that MAXILITE is no ordinary diet tablet. Unlike other diet programs, once you've taken MAXILITE literally reverses years of over eating. You need only follow the simple instructions. That's it! You can continue to enjoy those foods you love to eat. MAXILITE simply does not allow your body to absorb excess calories. Each day you'll notice absolutely visible results as your unwanted pounds of fat, flab, and cellulite completely disappear.

However, a word of caution is in order. Because MAXILITE is so effective at rapidly removing years of ugly fatty deposit, and because MAXILITE has absolutely no side effects, there is a tendency for some people to over do it. Do not allow yourself to become too thin. If you start to lose weight too rapidly limit your tablet intake, or even skip a day or two. Have a goal in mind and try not to go beyond it. Also, before starting any weight loss program you should check with your physician to determine that you are in normal health!

COMPANY OFFERS EXTRAORDINARY GUARANTEE. They have tested the product and are convinced that with MAXILITE you can achieve the natural looking body of your dreams. They don't care if you've tried to lose weight before and failed. They have the results of skeptical people who now swear by MAXILITE.

If you place your order now and then follow the simple instructions for a trial period of 30 days, you must be completely satisfied with the dramatic results or just return the empty bottle and **PRINCETON LABS** will immediately send you your entire purchase price.

Best of all . . . ordering MAXILITE is simple, fast and reliable! Send your payment to: **PRINCETON LABS, 4217 Highland Street, Suite 119, Dept. (P390), Pontiac, Mich 48054**

Or if you prefer dial, **TOLL FREE 1-800-345-5583, Ext. (P390)**, and charge it to your credit card. Visa or Master Card only, No C.O.D.

\$19.95 - 30 day supply, or \$39.95 - 60 day supply, or \$49.95 - 90 day supply, plus \$3.00 shipping and handling. Operators are standing by 24 hours a day and will be glad to take your order.

MY HUSBAND LOST 43 LBS. AND I LOST 54 LBS. AND WE ARE STILL LOSING WEIGHT.



BEFORE



AFTER

My husband and I cannot thank you enough for letting us use the new MAXILITE tablets. We used to think we would rather be fat than to give up food. My husband and I love to eat and we were on so many diets we just gave up . . . until we tried MAXILITE. We lost a total of 97 lbs., and we still enjoy the food we love.

Mr. & Mrs. Gil

four years ago, Amanda had become a part of her, and she now rarely ventured anywhere without Amanda at least lurking at the edge of her consciousness.

"South America's loss is England's gain," Nigel murmured gallantly as he picked her hand up from where it lay on the table.

Iris watched, fascinated, as he raised her hand to his lips. This time he placed a warm, intimate kiss in her palm, which turned the entire appendage to jelly.

"Still hungry?" he asked, his warm breath against her hand stirring thoughts that had nothing to do with food.

"I couldn't eat another bite."

"Then, how about feeding the ducks with all the leftover crackers?"

"The ducks?"

"Down by the river," Nigel explained as she rose from her chair. "Who's going to feed them if we don't?"

Nigel handed her half of the biscuits and guided her out the door.

"There they are," Iris cried as they approached the river.

Quickly breaking up a cracker, she tossed several pieces in the direction of the fowl. They dived after the food in a flurry of craning necks and bobbing tail feathers.

After all the crackers were gone, the ducks set up a noisy protest.

"Sorry, guys. The food's all gone." Iris held out her empty hands, but that didn't stop the quacking.

"Cheeky devils," Nigel whispered as one of the ducks scrambled up onto the bank.

"No more food," Iris declared with a stomp of her boot, but the clamor continued. She took a step backward. "They aren't dangerous, are they?"

"Only in groups of three or more. Why, there are two more. I do believe they're going to rush us!" Nigel warned in mock alarm as several more ducks clambered

onto the shore. "We'd better make a run for it!"

Iris laughed as Nigel pulled her away from the waddling, quacking ducks. Hand in hand, they dashed around the conservatory and behind a row of trees. The sound of the angry fowl dimmed and then disappeared, leaving only the whisper of the wind.

"I think we'll be safe here," Nigel finally assured her as they stood beneath the shadow of a large, leafy tree.

Unaccountably exhilarated by the unexpected spurt of silliness from Nigel, Iris leaned back against the knotty trunk. The foolishness of the situation hadn't detracted from his masculinity, she noticed. With his blond hair falling across his forehead and his gray eyes lightened by laughter, he was even more attractive.

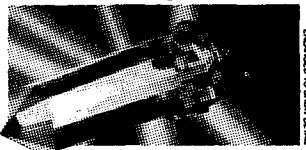
Looking down at her flushed face and sparkling eyes, Nigel wondered why he'd acted with such uncharacteristic impulsiveness. He shouldn't be surprised, though. He'd acted uncharacteristically from the moment he'd set eyes on her—pretending to be a groundskeeper, giving her a tour of the gardens, and asking her to an impromptu picnic. That was quite an afternoon for a man who prided himself on being steady and pragmatic!

Bringing his hand to her face, Nigel brushed her cheek with the backs of his fingers before outlining her lips with the pad of his thumb. This was another of those uncharacteristic impulses that he wouldn't be able to fight. He would have to taste her just once.

Iris was watching his eyes when they changed. The amusement flickered out of them, leaving only desire, strong and hot.

His lips touched hers gently, sending small licks of lightning through her and making her tremble like a leaf in a summer storm. For support, she clung to the sweater softness that covered the unyielding strength of his arms.

Did the Hand of God create this 4-Million-Year-Old Miracle Crystal to generate riches...love...good luck for YOU? Take it **FREE!***



DIRECT FROM OUR JEWELRY VAULT AT WORLD CRYSTAL POWER CENTER.

This is your opportunity to benefit by an ancient source of energy... just **re-discovered** by modern science... The story goes back 4 million years. Tremendous forces—**deriving from God's energy itself**—were shaping the earth. And dynamic charges of those energy forces were embedded in shimmering, jewel-like crystals.

Now we are witnessing a **worldwide re-awakening**. That ancient "crystal power" is generating miracle-like good luck for men and women fortunate enough to possess even one Miracle Power Crystal.

Right now, very few know about this amazing power. Those who do are among the wealthiest and most successful people in America—including film stars, socialites, business leaders. But they seldom talk about it—except among themselves!

Owners of Miracle Power Crystals won't part with them at any price. Yet, you may have one **FREE**—just for the asking—if you act **at once**.

Just complete and return the coupon—and a genuine Miracle Power Crystal will be sent to you without charge* or obligation of any kind.

The Power of the Crystal makes all things possible!

Think of your greatest problems in life. The Power of the Crystal can solve them.

Think of the things you want most in life that have always seemed out of reach. The Power of the Crystal will bring them to you.

• **Do you need money?** The vibrant energy waves of your Miracle Power Crystal will make money flow your way. It may come in the form of an unexpected gift or inheritance. (It was reported only last month that one woman—faced by a mountain of bills—suddenly received \$100,000.00). Or a lottery jackpot. Or winning the daily double at the track. Or an investment that pays off handsomely. Or in any of a hundred ways. Whatever your need, good luck will come to you!

• **Do you have trouble getting ahead.** Jobs, promotions, career opportunities will open up as if by magic. Don't be surprised if an idea hits you and you start a business—become your own boss—give orders instead of taking them. Put the good-luck energy of your Miracle Power Crystal to work for you—now.

• **Do you have problems making new friends or finding love?** The Miracle Power Crystal can bring you true friendship and satisfying love—in a way that will probably surprise you! Be patient—it will come to you!

Once you possess the Miracle Power Crystal, you will experience a tremendous inflow of all the goods of life that most people can only dream about. Power... success... money... **GOOD LUCK**—all can be yours through the mysterious electromagnetic waves of the Miracle Power Crystal.

WHY do we offer you a Miracle Power Crystal FREE?*

We are making this unusual offer because we believe in acting on our convictions.

We don't think it is fair that rich people should try to hoard these miraculous crystals.

We don't think it is right that the wealthy should try to buy up all the crystals they can get their hands on—for themselves, their

children, and their special friends. The Power of the Crystal should NOT be used just to help the rich get richer—and those who already have everything get even more!

We feel that **working people also deserve a chance at the good things in life** that these crystals can bring! That's why—as long as our supplies last—we'll send a Miracle Power Crystal **FREE** to every working man or woman—whether or not currently employed—who returns our coupon.

In return, we ask only one thing—that you pledge **ON YOUR HONOR never to sell your crystal to anyone**. Not even if you're offered \$500... \$1,000... even \$5,000 or more! Remember, we trust you to honor this pledge.

We can provide only one crystal per person. And only mail requests will be honored (while supplies last). Please do not come in person to the World Crystal Power Center on Fifth Avenue.

Supplies, we repeat, are limited. Requests will be filled on a first-come, first-served basis. There is no obligation to buy anything, and no representative will ever phone or come to your home. And no donation will be asked. To avoid disappointment, you are urged to go to the coupon **RIGHT NOW** and mail it to **World Crystal Power Center, 521 Fifth Ave., 17th Floor, New York, NY 10175.**

*If you're having a streak of bad luck... if you often find yourself short of cash... if good things always seem to be out of your reach... **STOP WORRYING and mail the coupon right now!** With the Miracle Power Crystal in your possession, your luck will change. Watch how quickly the electro-magnetic waves attract money... good luck... romance! It's unbelievable!*

©1989 IRPI

MIRACLE POWER CRYSTAL Yours FREE!*

World Crystal Power Center
521 Fifth Avenue, 17th Floor
New York, N.Y. 10175

RG2VA1

Yes, I am a working person. Please send me a Miracle Power Crystal without charge* or obligation. In return, I promise never to sell my crystal to anyone, for any amount, at any time.

*Although there is no charge for the crystal, please enclose \$1 to cover special handling and postage.

Print Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Birthdate _____

Nigel was overwhelmed by her. He tried to draw back, but couldn't. One taste would never be enough. With a groan, he assailed her lips once more, tasting and nibbling, not satisfied until he drew an answering sigh from her.

Not too fast, he warned himself! Slowly. Gently.

With a resolve almost undone by Iris's instinctive urge to cling to him, Nigel put his hands on her shoulders and set her away from him.

Iris cautioned herself not to take the kiss too seriously, knowing she wasn't sophisticated enough for a whirlwind affair with an English gardener. Besides, given the English feudal class system, Lady Dantley and her relations, the Earl and his son the Baron, would certainly not look favorably at all upon a gardener who ventured above his station.

Before Nigel's mouth could reclaim hers, Iris touched his lips with her fingers. Tracing their outline, she gazed into his questioning eyes and wondered how she should broach the subject. But before she could even begin, the sound of irate quacking broke the silence.

"Oh, lord," Nigel said when a quick glance over his shoulder revealed a score or so of angry ducks. "I believe they've found us. Have you any suggestions?"

"Since we can't outrun them, we'll just have to outclimb them."

With a smile, Iris pointed to the limbs of the tree that spread out above them. Quickly, Nigel cupped his hands, and Iris placed one booted foot in them. Once she had gained a foothold on the lower branch, Nigel swung easily up to stand beside her. With little effort, they gained a large branch several feet higher and settled down in its crook to watch the ducks as they quacked and waddled around below them.

"This does have certain advantages," Nigel whispered in her ear as he put an

arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him. A moment later, his lips moved to claim hers.

Suddenly, a gruff voice shook them apart. "You come down from that tree straightaway or I'll have your guts for garters."

Secure in the bough of the tree, Nigel looked down to see that Humphries, the head groundskeeper, had sent the ducks scurrying for cover before turning his attention on them.

"Don't let him frighten you," he told Iris, pulling her closer into the crook of his arm. "His bark has always been worse than his bite."

These few words caused the man on the ground to fall silent and squint up into the tree before turning the most amazing shade of red.

"Oh, my lord," the man cried. "I didn't know . . . I mean, who would have thought that your lordship would . . ." He stopped to scratch his bald head. "Pay no mind to me," he finally said, then turned around and took flight with the ducks.

"Your lordship?" Iris asked, gazing up into Nigel's eyes.

Nigel nodded, wondering what her reaction would be once she had recovered from the shock. She would undoubtedly have a temper, he decided, noticing the dangerous glint in her eyes. But it didn't matter how angry she became, really. He wasn't willing to let her walk out of his life. Not now. Not *yet!* There wasn't anyone or anything that could keep him from enjoying a few days of uncomplicated happiness. Not even her own silly temper.

But then, of course, she did the one thing he hadn't expected: She began to laugh so hard that he was afraid she'd fall out of the tree.

"You aren't angry, are you?" he asked as she dabbed at the tears that had pooled in the corners of her eyes.

She gave a shake of her head that sent

her dark hair flying back over her shoulders. "Do you think I should be?"

"Well . . . I was hardly forthright."

"You mean you weren't honest?" Iris asked, and watched as the furrow deepened between his brows. "Well, don't worry. As far as I'm concerned, the only really unforgivable sin is being boring."

Nigel wondered why that pronouncement made him feel foolishly happy, but decided he would work that out once they were back on *terra firma*.

"In that case, I think we should consider descending from this tree. I'm eager to introduce you to Aunt Cecelia."

Iris asked. "Why is that?"

"Because if there is one word in the English language that has never been applied to my Aunt Cecelia it is *boring*. She's never done what anyone's expected her to. The two of you should get along famously."

Descending the main staircase three days later, Nigel decided he'd been quite right about Iris and his aunt getting along. The two women had spent a good deal of time together, and they never seemed to lack for a topic of discussion. He had been shocked, then pleased to realize that Iris was the wealthy houseguest his aunt had been expecting all along. How lucky could he be?

"Good morning, Aunt Cecelia," he said, entering the dining room.

"Good morning, dear," she responded as he bent to kiss her soft, age-lined cheek. "You slept rather late, didn't you?"

"A bit," Nigel agreed. "Iris and I attended the Royal Shakespeare Theater last night."

Aunt Cecelia took a sip of her tea. "And did you have a pleasant evening?"

Had it been *pleasant*? Nigel wondered. Had any of the time they'd spent together during the last three days been *pleasant*? No. It had been alternately exhilarating,



YOUR FREE HOROSCOPE

Thanks to me you can fulfill your hopes.

I will reveal to you the strengths in your secret personality and thanks to my help you will be overjoyed to receive at last and immediately all the things you have longed for so long in vain! WITHOUT ASKING A DIME FROM YOU, I will prove this to you, by sending, at request,

YOUR FREE HOROSCOPE

I will teach you how to be victorious in love, how to make money and be lucky. I will tell you the truth about the secret reasons for your problems and will teach you the secrets of instant success.

**"I shall transform your life,
making it happy and rich
in fulfillment."**

I am not asking you for money. Your free personal horoscope will be mailed to you confidentially in a few days. So that you may live your life to the full and seize all the opportunities within your reach, send me the free voucher you see below, immediately — without waiting! Just fill out and mail!

DON'T SEND MONEY OR STAMPS because, as I repeat, the horoscope is absolutely free of charge.

FREE COUPON

Fill in questions and send to:
Prof. Lallemand, Dept. RG489,
P.O. B. 252, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11204
Please send me my free horoscope. It won't cost me a single cent nor will it obligate me in any way.
Place, date and time of my birth:

Name _____
Ad. _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

confusing, enchanting, and aggravating, but never simply pleasant. That word was much too . . . tame to describe time spent in the company of Ms. Iris McCormick.

"We enjoyed the play," he said simply.

"And how was the tour of Percy Pensworthy's gardens yesterday?"

"The gardens were wonderful, but I'm fairly certain we'll not be asked to the Pensworthys' garden party next month."

"Whyever not?"

"Percy decided to regale us with stories of his last ride to the hounds, and I'm afraid that Iris doesn't approve of chasing down 'some innocent little fox,' as she put it."

Aunt Cecelia reached out to pat her nephew's hand. "It must have been most disconcerting for you. I know how you hate scenes."

Nigel nodded, and wondered why he hadn't hated that particular scene. Iris had given Percy Pensworthy a dressing-down he would not soon forget!

"You didn't tell me how your visit with Sir Marley went the day before."

Nigel cleared his throat. "Not so well. I'm afraid Iris and Marley both hold very strong opinions about the conservation of the world's animal population. Iris is a charter member of COWASSA. That's Citizens of the World Against the Senseless Slaughter of Animals."

Cecilia chuckled. "She took exception to the stuffed bears in the entryway, did she?"

Nigel took a sip of tea. "Actually, I thought she behaved rather nicely about the bears."

Aunt Cecelia gave him a puzzled gaze. "All those adorable birds stuffed and mounted in the library, then?"

Nigel shook his head. "Actually, the elephant tusks crossed over the fireplace proved to be the final straw."

"I . . . see." Lady Cecelia took a sip of tea. "Am I to assume that we won't be

asked to Marley's annual hunting party in Scotland?"

"I'm afraid not."

A genuine smile creased Aunt Cecelia's face. "What a relief!"

"Good morning," Iris called just then as she entered the dining room. "Lady Dantley," she said with a smile and a nod of her head.

"Good morning, my dear."

"Nigel," she said in a voice that sounded just a little bit breathless. She'd thought that three days of his companionship would have taken care of that huskiness in her voice whenever she was with him.

"Iris."

Nigel stood as she entered.

She took the chair that Crandall, the butler, held for her and requested a bowl of oatmeal.

Lady Cecelia poured tea into Iris's cup as Crandall discreetly faded away. "I understand you and my nephew had an eventful time yesterday."

Iris looked at Nigel, who grinned.

"I suppose you could call it eventful, among other things," she conceded, hoping that Nigel's aunt was too well bred to pursue the subject.

"And have your little jaunts been helpful, dear?"

Iris considered the question. "Yes," she finally replied. "I think they have."

"She's an apt pupil," Nigel put in.

"But you've promised me a day off," Iris reminded him. To Lady Dantley, she said, "Today we get to play tourist. I want to see where Shakespeare was born and visit Anne Hathaway's cottage."

"I'm a man of my word," Nigel assured her.

He didn't think it was necessary to add that as her reputation spread, he was finding it more difficult to arrange invitations to private gardens.

Aunt Cecelia poured some more tea in-

to their cups. "I forgot to mention that your father rang up last night. He's motor-ing down today and will be here in time for tea. Oh, and Lady Gwendolyn will be joining us as well."

Nigel tossed his linen napkin onto the table. "Tea will be in the conservatory," he declared.

"In the conservatory," his aunt agreed. Turning to Iris, Lady Cecelia explained, "Lady Gwen is a dear, but she has a beast-ly dog, which she insists on bringing with her. The conservatory is the only place we can entertain her anymore."

Nigel pushed back his chair and rose. "I'll meet you in the foyer in thirty min-utes. And be sure to wear comfortable shoes," he told Iris with a smile."

Early that afternoon, Nigel glanced down at the woman who walked by his side and wondered what had brought on her sudden and completely unexpected

quiescence.

They'd spend most of this day walking through Stratford-upon-Avon and visiting all the usual tourists haunts. She had chat-tered and laughed all along, but now she seemed miles away, and he found himself missing the energy that usually snapped and crackled in the air around her.

"Tuppence for your thoughts," he said when she stopped walking to gaze out over the River Avon.

"I'm considering the benefits of time travel," she informed him.

"I . . . see," he murmured.

He assumed that Iris was referring to Amanda. She had finally disclosed to him the identity of her children's book heroine and had talked to him extensively about the many trips she had taken to gather background material for her fiction.

Iris grabbed his hand and pulled him over to a large tree set close to the river. "Maybe I should let Mandy sit down in the sun and go to sleep," she suggested, and



Mail Coupon Now!
YOU could Win
a FREE Wig!

A NATURAL Looking Wig... It Could be YOURS FREE!

We will draw 100 names from those who send for our FREE Catalog of the world's most NATURAL Looking Wigs before April 1, 1989. Winners may choose ANY wig in our catalog . . . FREE!

Enter my name in your Free Wig drawing and send me a FREE catalog. No Cost or Obligation. Nothing to buy.

Name _____
(Please Print)

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Do you ever wear wigs? ☐ Yes ☐ No

PAULA YOUNG Dept. 937, P.O. Box 246,
S. Easton, MA 02375

Copyright © 1989, Paula Young

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sat down, pulling Nigel along with her.

Surprised to find himself seated so unceremoniously, Nigel decided to make the best of it. Settling back against the trunk of the tree, he pulled Iris into the crook of his arm and realized with some surprise that she fit there as though made for him.

Then his mouth descended to hers. The kiss was not the kind designed to start forest fires, but the mere brush of his lips on hers gave Iris tingles right down to her toes.

Keep talking, she told herself. Over the last three days, her ability to chatter endlessly on any and every subject had kept Nigel and his almost enervating charms at bay. *Say something*, she told herself. *Anything!* But nothing came to mind, and she found herself still gazing up into his gray eyes.

"And what happens once you have Amanda seated?" Nigel asked softly.

"I'll simply let her nod off and dream about life in Shakespearean England. You see, I'd like to promote a little better understanding of how people lived in the past. I've had Amanda travel around the world because I believe there's a lot to be learned from the different cultures. But what about the lessons the past can teach us?"

"Yes, but why do you write at all?"

Iris turned her head to smile up into his serious gray eyes. "You mean why do I write when I obviously don't need the money?"

"I'd never be so gauche as to ask such a question," Nigel informed her with a grin. "Even if I did want to know the answer."

Settling back in his embrace, Iris wondered how she could explain Amanda without saying too much about herself, for Amanda was little more than her own alter ego. And she wasn't sure just how much of her soul she was willing to bare to a man whose touch could elicit needs and desires she'd thought she had left behind

with the ruins of her broken marriage.

"Mandy was the only child born of my marriage to Jeremy McCormick," she began, "since he simply didn't have the time to devote to being a father of a real child. He was much too dedicated to his constituency."

"And so you decided to create a child of your own."

"Nothing quite so neurotic," she assured him. "Mandy was born out of need, but not mine. Several years ago, some of our politicians diverted to military use a sum of money intended for a hot-lunch program for needy children. Naturally—or at least naturally in America—a charity was formed to raise money to keep the lunch program going. They hit upon the idea of having several well-known people write children's stories, which they compiled into one book and sold. The proceeds from the book were used to fund the lunches. Amanda was born during that project."

"And the rest, as they say, is history?"

"Not exactly. I volunteered for the project. My story was so well received that the publisher asked me to do a whole series of Amanda books."

"And that didn't sell your husband on the joys of parenthood?"

"Hardly. He was one of the politicians who voted to kill the lunch program. He viewed my success as a slap in his face."

"He should have been proud of you," Nigel said softly. "He should have been glad that you'd found a way to feed those children."

"That's what I thought, but he said it made him look like a fool. Like a man who couldn't control his wife. We got divorced not long afterwards."

Nigel hugged her close to him. "Your husband was a fool. I would have given you a hundred children—all made of flesh and bone and love—if they would have kept you by my side."

It came as something of a shock to Nigel to realize that he actually meant what he'd said.

On their way back home, Nigel and Iris stopped for some lunch at the Golden Cock, a pub frequented by the local people. Iris soon felt quite at home with the pub customers, and, spurred on by a few beers, she got involved in a game of darts. By the time she had beat everyone, Nigel informed her that they had better be going, as they were quite late for tea.

"How late are we?" Iris asked as they were driving back to the manor.

"I promised Aunt Cecelia we'd be home by four." Taking his hand from the wheel of the Mercedes, Nigel glanced at his wristwatch. "It's almost half past."

"Mmmmm," Iris murmured. "Your aunt Cecelia doesn't seem the type to banish us to the dungeon because we're a little late."

Nigel laughed. "It's not Aunt Cecelia I'm worried about. Father abhors tardiness."

Iris asked, hearing a perceptible tension in his voice, "Does the earl spend much time at Dantley Hall?"

Nigel shook his head and turned onto the private road that led to Dantley Hall. "My father lives at Merrick House, our seat in Yorkshire," he explained. "Actually, he and Aunt Cecelia don't get on very well."

"And why is that?"

"Well, my mother was Cecelia's younger sister," Nigel explained. "She died when I was still in short pants. It then fell to Father and my aunt to raise me. Aunt Cecelia felt that Father was too strict. Father felt she coddled me too much. And despite the fact that I'm now a grown man with apartments at Dantley Hall and Merrick House, as well as a small flat in London, there's still a certain amount of animosity between them."

"But what do they have to argue about now?" Iris asked.

"Actually, at the moment they're in perfect agreement," Nigel replied. "They both feel that I need to get married. To breed up heirs."

"Oh." Iris turned to gaze out the window at the passing scenery.

Nigel wasn't sure why her response disappointed him. After all, what had he expected her to say? He should be relieved that at least one person of his acquaintance didn't feel it was her right to give her opinion concerning his marital state . . . shouldn't he?

"You're late," Allister Burke, eleventh earl of Merrick, informed his son as soon as he had given Iris's hand a perfunctory shake.

Iris assessed the man who had greeted them in the foyer. To her, he seemed about

PREGNANT? WORRIED?

**CONSIDER ADOPTION
THE LOVING CHOICE**

FREE:

- ♥ MEDICAL
- ♥ HOUSING
- ♥ COUNSELING

**Call toll-free 24 hrs.
in confidence**

1-800-722-7731

Adoptions With Love, Inc. is a
non-profit licensed adoption service

as friendly as a mortgage officer at a bank.

"Sorry, Father," Nigel said, though he showed no sign of remorse. "Iris was giving the lads down at the Golden Cock a lesson in darts, and we simply lost track of time."

"Darts?" Lord Merrick asked, as horrified as if his son had admitted selling state secrets to the enemy. "At the Golden Cock?"

Nigel nodded. "Where is Aunt Cecelia?" he asked brushing him off.

"She's already gone to the conservatory."

"Let's join her then," Nigel said, extending his arm to Iris.

"I was hoping to speak to you privately," Lord Merrick said before Iris could become too comfortable with her arm linked in Nigel's.

Iris studied the earl. It was obvious that he found her presence worrisome.

"I would like time to freshen up," she said to Nigel. "Why don't you two go on, and I'll meet you in the conservatory."

Reluctantly, Nigel let her go, and, after giving her a warm smile, followed his father out the door.

"Don't you think that was rather rude?" Nigel demanded of his father once they were alone together and headed toward the conservatory.

"Don't speak to me of manners! What about your failure to appear at the Merrick Garden Show? You were scheduled to present the awards," his father reminded him.

Nigel felt a muscle jump in his jaw and willed himself to stay calm. He would not allow his father to undo four days of peace and relaxation in less than ten minutes.

"It isn't as if I simply failed to show. I rang up Lady Deborah. She was happy to stand in for me." Nigel's stepmother was always happy to take part in family rituals.

"You aren't still angry about our last

conversation, are you, Nigel? It's just that I'm concerned. It's high time you married."

"I never disagreed with that. I simply said that I'd rather be exiled to the outer reaches of Siberia than be married to Miss Lillian Smythe-Forbes and her likes."

"You want a woman who alienates the neighbors and plays darts at the local pub?"

Nigel stopped dead in his tracks and fixed his father with a considering gaze. "Well, that certainly explains your sudden visit. Tell me, how did you find out about the neighbors?"

"Percy Pensworthy called. And Marley did, too. They mentioned that Cecelia had another of her strange houseguests."

"There is nothing strange about Iris. She just has a mind of her own."

By then, they had almost reached the conservatory.

"A ridiculous place for tea," the earl complained as it came into sight. "Why Cecelia can't have it in the salon as usual is beyond me."

Nigel laughed, relieved to discover that his father's ill-humor was losing its effect on him.

"That's because you haven't met Lady Gwendolyn's dog, Siegfried!"

"Humph," his father's replied. Then, he exclaimed, "My God, is that a *pony* tethered on the lawn?"

Nigel looked at the huge animal, which appeared to be pursuing a bug in the grass. "That," he said with a grin, "is Siegfried."

"I will never understand people who cannot be punctual," Allister complained as he sat with Lady Gwen on the white wicker settee sipping tea from an antique Limoges cup.

Lady Gwendolyn Willoughby gave an emphatic nod of her head in unspoken agreement with Allister.

"Americans," she complained. "They

never learned to enjoy the civilized custom of tea. In too much of a rush, if you ask me."

"No one asked you, dear," Cecelia told her sweetly. "And how was your holiday in Monaco?"

Nigel gazed off over the green hills and gently flowing river as Lady Gwen launched into one of her boringly detailed stories. He didn't know anyone who could make travel sound as mundane as Lady Gwen.

Certainly, Iris knew how to find color and excitement in the world. Nigel had never in his wildest dreams considered visiting the head-hunting tribes of New Guinea or watching the custom dances on the South Pacific island of Tana, but when Iris had described the extraordinary color and spectacle of the events, he'd felt as though he had experienced them firsthand. It was a gift she had, this ability to see the world as a place of beauty and wonder, and to share her vision with others.

He wondered again what it would be like to love a woman who was so giving.

Suddenly, the quacking of waterfowl in the distance disrupted his daydreaming.

Iris was obviously approaching.

Nigel was watching the door when it burst open; he was used to seeing Iris make dramatic entrances. However, even he was surprised when she slammed the door and leaned back against it as though she had just escaped from the hounds of hell. Or the ducks.

"I didn't feed them," Iris began without preamble. "Not one cracker. Not one crumb. I didn't even *speak* to them! They just started following me."

"Whom didn't you speak to?" Aunt Cecelia asked.

"The ducks," Iris explained as the sound of quacking continued outside.

"It would have been better if you had treated the neighbors like that," Allister



FREE OFFER

Only for readers
of this magazine

With this Free Offer, Mr. Rayat,
world renowned Clairvoyant
and Astrologer,
offers you your horoscope!

"I will reveal to you the secrets of your life, tell you what your chances are for success and ways to improve your destiny. You will receive my free consultation for success in love and good fortune, overcome your sorrows and problems and make your life joyous and happy."

Does the Horoscope Foretell You What Your Destiny Is?

"Every day I receive many letters of wonder about my amazing work on behalf of others, for my extraordinary predictions have astounded people all over the world. I shall focus my powers on you, because I want your life to be happy. I want you to SUCCEED in everything: — FINANCE, JOB, FRIENDSHIPS, LOVE AFFAIRS, HEALTH, FUTURE, etc., just as I have brought satisfaction to thousands of other people. I SHALL REVEAL EVERYTHING ... BECAUSE YOU SHOULD KNOW EVERYTHING. Regardless of your age, your state of health, your defeats or disappointments, you too may transform your life and substitute PROSPERITY and JOY for misfortune, and attain that COMPLETE HAPPINESS TO WHICH YOU ARE ENTITLED.

Within days, SENSATIONAL REVELATIONS will be in your hands. SO DON'T WASTE ANOTHER MINUTE. WRITE TO ME IMMEDIATELY.

To receive your HOROSCOPE, fill out the coupon below. Remember, this is absolutely FREE.

PRIORITY COUPON

Mr. Rayat, Dept. RG289

P.O. Box C640 Brooklyn, N.Y. 11223

Please rush me my **FREE HOROSCOPE**,
WITHOUT ANY OBLIGATION.

NAME _____

ADD. _____

CITY _____

STATE _____ ZIP _____

DATE OF BIRTH _____

PLACE OF BIRTH _____

interjected. "Talk to the ducks as much as you like. That's my opinion."

"Don't be rude, Allister," Cecilia said mildly just before the sound of barking joined the chorus of ducks.

"Siegfried!" Lady Gwendolyn cried as she jumped to her feet and headed for the door. Pushing Iris aside, she ran outdoors. "Don't worry, Siegfried. Mother is coming!"

"Good Lord!" Allister exclaimed as he levered himself to his feet and went to look out one of the beveled-glass windows. Cecilia sat calmly sipping her tea as the sound of quacking and barking continued, punctuated every so often by the shrill and very unladylike oaths of Lady Gwen.

It was obvious to Nigel that someone was going to have to calm both dog and owner—and quickly. He'd taken his first step toward the fracas when he heard a moan beside him.

He looked down at Iris in time to hear her say, "I can't watch," at which point she lowered her head and tried to burrow into his chest. Nigel's first instinct, of course, was to gather Iris in his arms and rest his cheek on the top of her head.

"It will be fine," he assured her.

But when he looked back, he discovered that Lady Gwendolyn was releasing the dog's leash from the stake. At that point, Nigel knew there was nothing he could do to save the situation. He watched in fascination as Siegfried, no longer restrained, took off in pursuit of the most offensive duck.

When the noise died down Iris pushed out of Nigel's arms. Time to face the music, she decided. Time to leave the security of Nigel's embrace and face the cold, cruel world.

But nothing could have prepared her for the sight of Lady Gwen staggering up the conservatory steps utterly disheveled.

"My poor, poor Siegfried," she sobbed.

"What will those awful birds do to him?"

Lady Cecelia rose and put her arm around her friend's shoulders. "I wouldn't worry, dear. I'm certain he'll return home when he gets hungry."

Or when he runs out of ducks to harass, Nigel thought grimly.

That evening, as she looked through her clothes for something to wear to dinner, Iris wondered which dress a Christian would have chosen to wear to the Colosseum. Certainly not the red one; that would be like waving a red flag in the beast's faces—and Lord Merrick was furious enough as it was.

So was Lady Gwendolyn, after many unsuccessful attempts to recapture Siegfried.

Ultimately, Iris decided to wear her quaintly old-fashioned innocent-looking white dress.

She was just about to leave the guest room when she heard the sound of barking. Running to the window seat, she was certain she could see Siegfried moving beneath the shadows of the trees. Deciding she had no time to waste getting help, and cursing both herself and the wretched animal, Iris slipped down the servants' stairs and out a side door.

"I do so love a happy ending," Lady Cecelia said after dinner with a sigh. She turned to Iris, who sat to her right. "And it wouldn't have happened, if you hadn't been willing to go out after Siegfried when everyone else had given up hope."

"No one would have *needed* to go out after dark if she hadn't caused the mess in the first place," Sir Allister mumbled ungraciously from his seat on Cecelia's left.

"I think the credit should go to the man who actually collared him," Iris said as she turned to Nigel, who sat beside her.

At the last moment, as Iris was running after Siegfried in the dark, Nigel, catching

sight of her through the dining room window, had run out with the prime rib which had just been placed on the table for the evening meal. That had been instrumental in luring Siegfried close enough so that he could be caught and returned to his lady.

Clearly, Sir Allister, fuming over the loss of a magnificent cut of meat, had no intention of congratulating either his son or Iris for this success.

"It's obvious to me that everything's going to remain chaotic until she"—he gave Iris a scathing look—"has been sent packing," he declared, leaving the room.

There was a full minute of complete silence before Iris placed her napkin beside her plate. "I think I'll go on up to bed," she said quietly. "Chasing dogs always makes me tired."

Nigel hated to see the light fade from Iris's eyes. He would gladly have retracted his father's rude words, if only he could have.

"I'll walk you up," Nigel told her. "You mustn't let Father upset you," he added. "He doesn't like change."

"He doesn't like me, either," Iris declared boldly.

"I think it's more that he doesn't like the way you turn things topsy-turvy."

"Oh, great! Is that supposed to make me feel better?" They had stopped in front of Iris's door.

"I like the way you turn things topsy-turvy," Nigel informed her. "I haven't had this much fun since I put snakes in Nanny's desk drawer."

Iris laughed at the thought of a young boy with serious gray eyes putting snakes in his nanny's desk.

"That's exactly what I thought the first day I saw you," she said. "You looked so darn serious that I just couldn't stand it."

He reached up to stroke the dark sheen of her hair. "And you looked so beautiful that I couldn't take my eyes off you. You're even more beautiful now."

Nigel caught her wrist before she could elude his grasp. Bringing her hand to his lips, he placed a gentle kiss in her palm. "I've never known anyone as beautiful as you," he murmured, his breath warm against her wrist.

"Don't go serious on me," she begged, trying to pull her hand from his grasp and her eyes from his gaze.

Nigel pulled her closer. "I've always been serious about you," he whispered as he lowered his head toward hers. "I've always known since that first moment that there was something special between us," he murmured just before capturing her lips with his own.

Had she known? Iris wondered, then couldn't remember the question or the answer or why it was important. The touch of his lips seemed to short-circuit her ability to think. It was obvious that he was a man who knew how to kiss—and how to make a woman want more.

"You felt it, too, didn't you?" he demanded finally.

"Yes," she whispered, and acknowledged the truth to herself for the first time. "I felt it. And now I'm through fighting it."

Iris's hands met at the nape of his neck, the pressure of her touch urging his mouth down to hers. When their lips met, she tangled her fingers in his hair and tilted her head so the kiss deepened. She couldn't breathe, didn't want to. She'd never before known desire like this, desire so powerful that it almost blotted out sanity and all memory of her former heart-break.

But she had promised herself there would be no more broken hearts. No more interweaving of lives so vastly different that she lost part of herself when they came unraveled. With great effort, she wrenched her lips free.

But where she had expected Nigel to be frustrated or even angry over her sudden

withdrawal, she was surprised to find only humor in his gray eyes. He stood grinning down at her while she struggled for breath.

"I'm a patient man," he murmured. "And persistent. I'm willing to chase dogs or slay dragons or do whatever is necessary to gain your trust." Giving her one last hard kiss, he said, "Remember that when you have trouble sleeping tonight," and was gone.

After exchanging a few harsh words with his father on the subject of Iris and his feelings about her, Nigel left early the next day to catch up with work he had left behind. When he returned late that evening, he was very upset to be told by the butler that Iris was leaving early the next morning.

He was sitting in the Wedgewood room when Iris, who was also feeling quite dejected, walked in.

If she was honest with herself, she might admit that she was leaving here—leaving Nigel—in the nick of time. He was definitely getting under her skin. If she spent much more time with him, she might find herself caught up in some sort of . . . relationship.

But then why was she all mixed up inside, knowing she should go but wanting to stay instead? This wasn't like her. She was an independent woman. A woman who knew her own mind.

Damn, but men knew how to mess up a woman's life!

Iris took one look at Nigel and knew he was exhausted. She so wanted to go and hug him and make his weariness go away. Instead, she walked up to him and said, "Hello, Nigel. I came to say goodbye. I wanted to thank you for all your help. I really appreciate it."

She stood there expecting him to say something sort of stuffy and polite so that she could go up to her room and shed the

tears she suddenly felt clogging her throat. She wasn't expecting him to say, "You're too far away," as he reached out and caught her hand and pulled her onto his lap. Placing his index finger below her chin, he aligned her lips with his.

His mouth came down to cover hers so quickly that she had no time to protest, then didn't want to. If this was going to be good-bye, she might as well make the best of it.

"I've needed that all day," he told her as the kiss ended moments later. His husky voice and the passion smoldering in his eyes kept her heart pounding at an alarming rate. "I needed to hold you and kiss you and hear your voice."

She wanted to say she'd missed him, too, but there seemed no point in it, since she was leaving the next day, so instead she said, "I waited up to say good-bye."

"Why are you leaving? Did my kiss last night frighten you?"

"It wasn't your kiss that frightened me, Nigel."

"What was it, then? I can't very well slay dragons I can't see."

Iris knew what had frightened her: Nigel represented all the things that she had fled from in her first marriage. Living in a goldfish bowl simply was not her style. She had trouble doing what was expected, and she found it impossible to stay away from controversy. Those aspects of her character had ruined her first marriage, and she couldn't see how they would make her any more compatible with an English nobleman than she had been with an American politician.

Of course, she couldn't very well tell Nigel that. He'd never even hinted that he had anything more permanent in mind than a night or two beneath an antique canopy. So she had to settle for saying, "My divorce hurt a great deal. I promised myself that I'd never be hurt like that again, but you made me feel vulnerable."

"And that scared you?"

"Terrified would be more accurate," she admitted. "Anyway, I still have my mission to accomplish. Your father has arranged for me to visit some other private gardens throughout the country."

"My father?"

Iris nodded.

"How very nice of him," Nigel murmured, sarcasm heavy in his voice. "You do know why he's done it, don't you? He wants you to leave because he thinks his only son may be falling very hard for you."

"Oh," Iris murmured, for lack of anything better to say. "And is he?"

"If I say yes, it will make you conceited."

"No, it won't," she assured him. Wiggling out of Nigel's embrace, she pulled a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket, then handed it to him.

"These are the places your father has arranged for me to visit. Are they worth the trouble?"

"Well worth it," Nigel informed her, reading the paper. "I couldn't have chosen better myself."

"Nigel, why don't you come with me?" Iris said impulsively. "It'll be fun."

"I can't just pick up and go whenever I like," Nigel said reasonably. "I've got responsibilities."

Instinctively, she pulled on his silk tie until his lips were low enough for her to kiss. It wasn't a tentative kiss she gave him; it was the kind of kiss that spoke of need and desire and a body that yearned for his. "Come with me," she whispered when she finally tore her lips from his.

"Oh, Lord, woman," he moaned as he put his forehead against her own. "There's no denying the want between us. I want to . . . I've never wanted anything more . . . but I can't. I just can't."

"That's the real problem, isn't it?" She pulled out of his embrace. "You live for

your responsibilities . . . and a woman can't compete with that."

"And what do you live for?" he challenged her. "What is it that drives you to travel the world as if you're on some holy quest?"

"I live for the moment," she whispered. "For the moment, and for myself—because we never know how long we have. I won't be like my mother and spend my life dancing attendance on another human being. And what did that get her? Dead in a plane crash while she was helping my father campaign for reelection, that's what! I couldn't make myself do that for Jeremy, and I won't try it for anyone else. Now do you understand?"

"Yes," Nigel murmured.

"Will you remember me?" Iris asked after a few silent moments, because she needed to hear him say it.

"Everytime I see a duck," he promised. "Besides, this isn't good-bye. I think I'll meet you at Merrick House, the family seat in Yorkshire. It's the last stop on your itinerary," he explained. Then his mouth descended to hers for a kiss that was meant to keep her thinking of him.

With tears in her eyes, Iris said good-bye to Lady Cecelia the next morning and, refusing the butler's offer for help, carried her luggage outside, where a bright red Mercedes was waiting for her personal use. The car was part of Lord Merrick's plan to get rid of her. She was quite aware of that, and for the hundredth time told herself dejectedly that she was right about leaving Nigel behind. She didn't belong with these people. And she would never make a "proper" wife for Nigel.

Throwing open the left door, she jumped in and slammed the door.

"Where the hell is the steering wheel?" she demanded through her tears as she stared at the empty space before her.

"Just exactly where it should be," a man's voice told her. "On the right-hand

side of the car."

"Nigel!" He was sitting in the driver's seat, half turned toward her. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"That's a fine greeting, I must say."

"But what about all your responsibilities?"

"They didn't seem quite so important this morning."

Iris reached out to touch his cheek and a moment later she found her mouth crushed beneath his.

"Where to?" Nigel asked when the kiss ended.

"Anywhere," Iris informed him as she settled back in her seat. "But there's one thing you should know."

"And that is?"

Iris turned her head and looked him in the eye. "I'm still scared of becoming involved with you."

"That's fine," Nigel said as he switched on the engine and released the brake. "I'm still patient."

At least he was up to a point

For the next two days, Nigel patiently followed Iris around as she visited one garden after another. But on the third day, he exploded. "I'm tired of touring gardens and chatting amiably with Father's friends," he told her. "I'd rather go someplace where you and I can spend some time alone."

"You would?"

He lifted her hand and placed a kiss in the palm before returning it to his leg. "I would."

"But what will your father say?"

"Anything he wants. What do you say about Wales?"

"I say it sounds great. But why there?"

"I know of a beautiful place in northern Wales. Betws-y-Coed. It's set back in the hills among fields of wildflowers and clear streams. You're going to love it."

"Sounds heavenly."

The afternoon's drive was quiet and beautiful. Iris sat silently and watched the green vistas and hills that alternately fell away and rose on her left. To the right, on the other side of Nigel, she glimpsed the Irish Sea, looking still and glassy under an azure sky.

By the time they entered the town of Betws-y-Coed, Iris was nervously fidgeting in her seat, wondering what had possessed her to agree to a few days of uninhibited pleasure. The thought of sex with Nigel made her weak with anticipation, and yet scared her out of her wits at the same time.

But she needn't have worried. As it turned out, Nigel didn't take her to a romantic inn in the woods, but to the home of his best friends, Kate and Edwin Carlisle and their three young daughters.

And while Iris instantly liked the Carlises, she wondered what on earth Nigel's intentions were in bringing her there. For the next two days, they hardly saw each other alone: the Carlisle family enthusiastically followed them around every minute.

Finally, on the third day, Nigel came to her room to wake her up.

"You know, I have hardly seen you these last couple of days," Iris complained as he kissed her eyes.

"But that's going to change," Nigel informed her. "You and I are going to spend this day together."

"I don't believe it," Iris murmured as she turned on her side and propped herself up on an elbow.

"I mean it," Nigel said as he ran his fingers through her hair. "And we're going to have our own little picnic."

"Just you and me?" Iris asked.

"I think it's high time, don't you?" Nigel said, and was delighted to see the spark of passion in her eyes.

"Past time," she said quietly. Then,

more forcefully, she added, "But if you don't get out of here, I'll never get dressed."

"That sounds interesting, too."

"Out!" she commanded, and after stealing one quick kiss, Nigel left.

He found himself whistling as he made his way back to the kitchen. Though the last two days had proved to be a lesson in frustration, they had also proved most informative. He'd discovered that no matter how much Iris claimed to love the freedom of her gypsylike lifestyle, she'd adjusted to the simple family life of the Carlises with ease. He could tell that there hid inside her a deep yearning for this sort of life. Above all, it was obvious she loved children. She was truly wonderful with the Carlisle girls. He imagined how good she'd be with her own children—with *their* children. For if nothing else, these past two days had made him determined to make Iris his wife. Now all that was left was to convince Iris that he—no, that *they* were worth taking a chance on.

"I promised you that we would have privacy today," Nigel said, smiling down at Iris, who sat on a timeworn wall made of native rock while she shook pebbles out of her boots.

"You didn't tell me we'd have to scale a mountain to find it."

"You loved every minute of it."

"How could you tell?"

"You were humming. One doesn't usually hum when one is miserable. So, what do you think of my secret place?"

"Your secret place?" she asked. "You mean no one else knows about this?"

"I stumbled upon it quite by accident several years ago. I've come back several times since then, but I've never met anyone else here."

Absently, Nigel removed his hat and tossed it onto the wall behind him. Watch-

ing him, Iris felt she'd never been quite so aware of him as she was at this moment. Each aspect of the man had become so dear to her. It was no wonder he'd begun to haunt her dreams, both waking and sleeping. How could she bear it, she wondered, when she had to leave? The thought made tears gather. She turned away, determined not to let her fear of the future destroy their day together.

Nigel grasped her hand and pulled her close to him.

"Don't flutter," he said simply. "Sit here with me and let me hold you. You feel so good." He gathered her in his arms and laid his cheek against her sun-warmed hair. "And you smell wonderful. There's no need to rush. We've time enough."

But there wasn't time enough, Iris thought morosely. There was only now . . . today. That had been enough for her until her trip to England . . . until Nigel. Now all she could think of was the long, empty days that would stretch before her once this trip was over. That wasn't like her, she thought suddenly, and forced herself to concentrate on the moment.

Closing her eyes, she felt the warmth of the sun and the gentle kiss of the breeze. This was one of those golden moments that she would want to hold forever. Slowly, she relaxed and felt the moment lengthen. The call of a bird added the beauty of song, and Iris felt at peace as she had never felt before.

Hours later, after they had explored the countryside, waded in the stream, picnicked and drank wine, a laughing and delighted Iris bowed her head to receive a crown of lavender and yellow flowers which Nigel had plaited for her. When she raised her head again, she saw desire in his eyes burning as bright and hot as the sun above. With his lean hands, he framed her face, and she sat transfixed as he placed a ceremonial kiss on each cheek.

Her hands glided around his waist and found their way beneath his sweater even as he pulled her roughly into his embrace.

"Let me love you," he whispered easing her down onto the blanket. "Let me love you as I wanted to that first day in the garden."

In answer, she threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled his lips down to hers.

He rose to remove his sweater and tossed it onto the grass. "I need to see you," he said, his hands trembling as he removed her red sweater. It joined his blue one on the ground, to be followed by her wispy lace bra.

"So beautiful," he murmured, then lowered his head so that he could worship her with his lips.

Iris had never felt so alive, so capable of giving and receiving joy.

"Are you frightened?" Nigel asked, because he had to know now while he could still stop.

"Yes," she whispered. "I'm frightened that I won't please you—that I can't give you perfection. And I want to." She turned her face aside, not wanting her tears to spoil the moment.

"Don't," he murmured as he pressed gentle kisses on her cheeks. "Don't cry."

"I can't help it. It never mattered before, because I never needed Jeremy as I need you."

"You need me?" Nigel asked, his gray eyes searching her brown ones. She nodded her head, because the words wouldn't come. "Then it is perfect," he told her.

And he was right, she discovered, when moments later they shed the last of their clothes and lay entwined beneath the azure sky. There was no time for fear as higher and higher they soared, caught in the vortex of their passion until they burst free in one last, frenzied lunge to float shuddering above the earth. And when the last tremor of passion left her lying still

and exhausted, Iris put her arms around him and held him close as they floated softly back down to earth.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"For what?" Nigel asked.

"For these perfect moments. For this golden day."

He ran his hands down her back. "The day isn't over," he promised. "There are still perfect moments to be found, if you're willing."

Iris gazed up into the soft gray of his eyes. "I'm not only willing," she told him. "I could become downright demanding."

The next forty-eight hours were the most perfect Iris had ever known. But then Nigel was called back to Merrick Hall by his father. Business awaited him. It was time to go.

Iris folded the last of her clothes and placed them in the suitcase. Then, wanting to put some lipstick on, she looked at herself in the mirror. A fool looked back at her.

A fool in love.

"How did you let it happen?" she demanded. "How did you fall in love with a man who has so many ties and responsibilities that he couldn't be free in a hundred years?"

But there was no answer, only the click of the door and then Nigel's image as their eyes met in the mirror.

"You were rather quiet at dinner," he said.

Iris turned to face him. "I guess I'm just a little tired. I think I need to go home and rest."

"We leave for Merrick House tomorrow. You can rest there."

"I mean home—to America. I thought I might catch the train back to London tomorrow and go on home."

"No!" Nigel said quickly. "I want you to see Yorkshire. To see Merrick House."

Don't go yet. Stay," he pleaded as he caressed her cheek, with his hand.

And Iris, who had once thought she could be content to carry the memory of only a golden moment or two with her when she left, knew now that she had become greedy. She wanted more moments and more memories to keep her company in the long years ahead.

"I'll go with you to Yorkshire," she said simply.

Iris had wanted to hate it. She had wanted it to be grandiose and gaudy and badly scarred by the years. Instead, Merrick House sat like a warm and gracious Elizabethan *grande dame* on a stretch of verdant land. She understood immediately why Nigel loved it.

When they arrived, the butler informed them that Nigel's father and stepmother, Lord and Lady Merrick, wouldn't be returning for several hours. So Nigel took Iris around on a tour of the castle.

As they walked through the palatial domain of his ancestors, he explained to Iris that Merrick House had nearly been lost by his father's bad management. In fact, the family was still in deep financial trouble even though Nigel had stepped in in the nick of time and managed to recoup some of the losses.

Iris was stunned. This news certainly placed Nigel in a new perspective. But while she felt bad about the Merricks' financial problems, there was still no doubt in her mind that she, an American heiress, was nevertheless out of place here in this great mansion. The Merricks and their friends would never accept her as one of their own.

"I've saved the best for last," Nigel told her some time later. "The East Wing is the oldest. It's also in the worst shape, but I hope to correct that in the next year or two. Just use your imagination, if you can, and try to see it as it will be after some

extensive repairs."

The ground floor of the East Wing was taken up almost entirely by the Great Hall. Six tapestries hung in strategic panels around the room.

"They're Flemish—all four hundred sixty-nine pounds of them," Nigel pointed out. "Each one depicts a biblical scene. They're in rather bad shape at the moment, but I've just arranged to have them repaired by a conservator in Brussels. He does wonderful work. The best part is that he's agreed to do the repairs for free and pay me a sum of money if I'll allow him to make a copy of that one."

Iris studied the tapestry Nigel pointed to.

"It's David and Bathsheba," Nigel continued. "You remember the story, don't you?" He stepped closer and gazed down into her eyes. Passion smoldered there. "He was so in love with Bathsheba that he'd do anything—even order her husband's murder—to have her. I never understood King David before. But then, I didn't understand love." Nigel's hand came up to cup the back of her head. She melted into his arms as his lips descended to hers. Moments later, when he held her close against him, Nigel murmured, "I find it so much easier to understand him now."

Iris stood very still within his embrace. She thought for a moment that she'd even forgotten how to breathe. Was he trying to say that he loved her? But before she could question him, Nigel stepped back and took her hand to lead her up the stairs.

The rooms on the second floor had once been bedrooms but stood vacant now. "I thought I might make this wing into the nursery," Nigel said. "There's more than enough space for bedrooms and playrooms and nanny's quarters, don't you think?"

"You'd need children," Iris pointed out.

"This house needs children. It would seem like a real home if I could hear childish laughter echoing off the walls."

Iris walked to one of the windows and gazed out at the manicured lawns and symmetrical sweep of trees. Nigel couldn't possibly be saying what she thought he was, she decided. He couldn't be saying that he loved her and wanted her to raise their children here. It was a simple case of her imagination running away with her.

But what if he was actually asking her if she could live here and raise his children and be happy? She wasn't certain what her answer would be, but she needed to be sure she understood the question.

She turned back to face him, determined to get to the bottom of things. But right at that moment, Nigel's father, Allister, walked in and Iris knew she had missed her chance.

She spent the rest of the day with Lady Deborah, who showed her the gardens, while Nigel and his father worked to unhang the tapestries and get them ready for shipment.

During dinner, Allister paid as little attention as possible to Iris, who went to bed feeling out of place and dejected.

But sleep wouldn't come. To match her mood, a violent storm was raging outside. Iris got up and looked out the window.

The storm rose to a crescendo of white light and crashing thunder that shook the house as though a bomb had exploded.

Then she saw it: a small lick of flame that seemed to dance along the roof of the East Wing of Merrick House.

"Oh, my God!" she whispered. She flung open her door and ran down the hallway. She had to tell Nigel!

She was screaming his name as she ran. Dimly, she was aware that Allister stood silhouetted in his doorway at the far end of the corridor.

"What is it?" Nigel asked, emerging

from his room.

"The East Wing's been hit by lightning," she cried.

Nigel turned to his father. "Ring the fire department!" he ordered. "Iris, run down and alert the servants. I want everyone out of the house and on the West Lawn. I'll check the public rooms to see if any of the staff is there. Quickly!" he commanded when they both stood rooted to the spot.

Allister tore out into the hallway, calling his wife.

"No heroics," Iris begged, grasping the collar of Nigel's jacket with her free hand.

"No heroics," he promised, then gave her a quick, urgent kiss.

Hand in hand, they sped through the hallway and down the great staircase, parting at the bottom with only time for a reassuring squeeze of each other's hands.

"Fire in the East Wing," Iris screamed. "Nigel wants everyone out on the West Lawn."

It seemed to take forever to herd the staff out into the wet night. Allister and Deborah were already there, but there was no sign of Nigel.

Iris stood quietly in the drenching downpour staring at the East Wing being devoured by flames. She hated to see the building destroyed—hated to see Nigel's dream reduced to ashes. And the tapestries. Had he taken them down from the walls today only to have them turned to ashes during the night?

No, she decided. She wouldn't just stand by and let that happen! Tearing across the sodden grass, she made her way to a row of French doors that looked out on the courtyard. Pushing one of them open, she stepped into the Great Hall.

There was no sign of fire in the timbered ceiling of the Great Hall—just the ominous tendrils of smoke that seeped into the room. Iris ran to the nearest tapestry lying rolled up on the floor and pulled at it. To her horror, it didn't even budge.

"It must weigh a ton!" she cried in despair, but she didn't give up.

Though Nigel had made a thorough search of the North Front, he was still relieved to discover that each member of the staff was on the West Lawn along with his father and stepmother. Thank God Iris had been awake tonight. If she hadn't been . . . He raked the group with his glance, suddenly aware that she was not with them.

"Where is she?" he asked. "Where's Iris?" he demanded when they simply stared at him. Then, with a flash of insight that had terror clawing at his insides like a wounded tiger, he tore toward the fire.

As he got closer to the inferno, he saw several of the tapestries tumbled on the lawn—and in the doorway that gaped open he saw Iris struggling to drag another of them to safety.

Catching her arm, he spun her around to face him.

"Help me," she cried.

"Leave it!" he commanded, and tried to draw her to safety. But she cursed him and tried to yank her arm free so that he was forced to grab her by the waist and drag her out of harm's way. The wail of a siren threaded its way through the chaos as he hauled her across the courtyard.

"Why didn't you help me?" she demanded glaring at him. "I almost had it, I *would* have had it, if you hadn't interfered!"

Gazing down at her, Nigel felt himself go limp with relief. He wasn't certain if he wanted to strangle her or kiss her.

"I didn't interfere," he shouted at her above the roar of the fire. "I saved your bloody life."

"I didn't need saving. I was saving the tapestries."

"The tapestries!" he shouted. "I don't give a damn about the bloody tapestries! You could have been killed!"

"You don't give a damn about the tapes-

tries?" she yelled incredulously. "I risked my life for those . . . those pieces of cloth, and now you tell me you don't give a damn about them? Is that the thanks I get?"

"Thanks? You expect me to *thank* you?" Nigel roared. "That was a bloody fool stunt. You're lucky I'm a gentleman; otherwise I'd be tempted to try to shake a little sense into that foolish head of yours."

"You wouldn't dare!" she screamed at him. When he stood staring at her, his hands balled into fists at his sides, she told him, "Don't you touch me. Don't you ever touch me again," and turned to stalk off into the night.

Several hours later, Iris stood at the window of her darkened room and gazed out at the East Wing. She wondered why it had taken the tapestries and a fire in England for her to make peace with her mother's life as well as her tragic death seven years before. Iris realized now—in fact had come to realize in a split-second of decision—the truth about the woman who had been her mother: *She* had never resented laying aside her own dreams for those of her husband, just as Iris hadn't hesitated to risk her own life to save those tapestries. For it had not been rolls of cloth that Iris had tried to pull from the fire, but Nigel's dreams. Dreams she had taken into her heart and made her own, just as her mother had once with her husband's desires. Tears ran down Iris's cheeks as she mourned the death of her mother—and the death of the dream she had come to cherish so recently.

She knew Nigel was furious with her, and she supposed, from a purely reasonable standpoint, he should be. But she couldn't bear to leave while he was still angry. And since she was determined to take to the open road tomorrow, she pulled the soft woolen blanket off the

chaise and wrapped it around her; she was going to make peace with him tonight.

"I came to apologize," she said minutes later, opening the door to his room and stepping inside. "It was a stupid thing I did, going into a burning building. I know it's pretty inadequate to say I'm sorry over something like this, but I am."

"Iris—"

She held up her hand. "No, let me finish, please. It was stupid; but I did it because I couldn't bear to see your dreams go up in smoke. I couldn't just stand by and watch those tapestries turned to cinders when I knew how much they meant to you."

"I was terrified—terrified that something would happen to you." Nigel moved to her and pulled her into his embrace and held her close to his heart. "I was afraid I'd lose you tonight. You can't possibly know how much that frightened me."

"I never meant to—" she began, only to have him silence her with a kiss. By the time the kiss ended, she couldn't remember what she'd wanted to say.

"I have something for you," he said pulling a little box out of his pocket. He snapped the lid open to reveal a ring set with a large ruby surrounded by diamonds and emeralds. "It was my mother's. Father gave it to her when they became engaged."

Iris gazed at the ring, and then back at Nigel. Shaking her head, she said, "I can't accept it."

"Why?"

"Because we're all wrong for each other. Because I made a mess of my marriage to an American politician, which is as close as we come to nobility in America. If I made a mess of that, what makes you think I won't ruin this, too?"

"Iris, my life won't be worth a damn without you," Nigel said earnestly. "You might as well say yes; otherwise, I'll just have to follow you around the world and

harass you until you break down and agree to marry me."

Iris stared at him silently for a long time. Her silence frightened him. "Say something," he begged.

"I love you," she said finally.

"And?"

She hesitated; then, swept along on the tides of love, Iris tossed overboard all her doubts and all the logical reasons why this couldn't work. "And I think I'd like to marry you. That is what you're asking, isn't it?"

As an answer, Nigel slid the ring onto the fourth finger of her left hand before scooping her up in his arms and carrying her to the bed.

"I hope you don't mind, but I've been working on the guest list," Deborah told Iris the next day, after Nigel and she had announced their engagement. Nigel had then left for the day to attend to business having to do with the fire, leaving Iris alone with Lord and Lady Merrick.

Iris took the tablet Deborah handed her and began to read through the pages of names.

"We're going to have to arrange for a few gatherings to introduce you to our friends," Deborah advised. "And we must make every effort to stop any rumors that Nigel is marrying you for your money."

Allister glanced up "I'm afraid people are bound to consider it just a bit too convenient that Nigel is marrying an heiress just now. We must scotch that notion right away. No need to mention your offer to underwrite the rebuilding to anyone else," he continued. "Very kind of you. Very kind indeed. And I'm certain that Nigel will come around on that point eventually. He's got a lot of pride, that boy, but I've never known the time when his common sense didn't prevail."

Iris smiled to herself at such a suggestion. Her engagement to Nigel had noth-

ing to do with convenience or common sense. It was, in fact, a case of passion overriding her own good judgment.

But suddenly doubt made shivers run up and down her spine. Was her money convenient for Nigel? Oh, she didn't for a moment think he would consciously marry her for her money, but perhaps he was being deluded by his own needs. After all, he hadn't popped the question until after the fire.

"I'm suddenly feeling very tired," she told her hosts. "I'll think I'll go up and lie down for a while."

"Of course, dear," Deborah responded.

Iris closed herself in her room and pondered the matter. All the doubts that had tormented her for the past few days returned in full force. She knew she loved Nigel, but love alone wasn't enough. They were two very different people and they came from two very different worlds. And if she couldn't be certain of Nigel's love, if there was the least suspicion that her money had anything to do with his marriage proposal, then this marriage was doomed to failure. The only reasonable thing to do was to put as much time and distance between Nigel and herself as she could.

Pulling her suitcase out of the closet, Iris began to toss her things into it. If she hung around until Nigel returned, she'd never be able to leave.

That was what she told him in the note—that they both needed time to sort out their feelings. Six months. Maybe a year. Then she left the letter and the ring on Nigel's pillow and asked the butler to send a car around.

A week later, Nigel was strolling down Shambles Street in York. He had just had lunch with Edwin and Kate, who had motored down to meet him here. They had listened kindly to his tales of woe and he felt better for having talked their ears off

for two hours.

Suddenly, outside the Jorvik Viking Center, he spotted Iris queuing up to go inside. He could hardly believe his eyes. What on earth was she doing here?

What Iris was doing was pretending she was researching a book about Amanda in Viking City. She hadn't been able to leave Yorkshire and sever all ties with Nigel after all.

"Iris!" he shouted.

"Oh, no," Iris moaned, realizing that if he ever held her in his arms, she would lose her resolve. "I don't want to talk to you," she yelled.

"Well, I jolly well want to talk to you," he responded, causing everyone in the crowd to look back and forth between them like spectators at a tennis match. "Do you realize that I have men combing the four corners of the earth looking for you?" he asked getting nearer. She didn't trust the rational tone of his voice as he went on. "Any reasonable woman trying to avoid an unwanted bridegroom would have fled the country. But where do I find you? Not twenty miles from the scene of your escape. Now, I ask you," he said, addressing the curious onlookers, "does that sound like a woman who's really trying to run away?"

"Not to me," a man called out at Iris's elbow.

"I'm doing research for a book," she shouted at Nigel, though he was less than a yard away.

"I want to know why you ran away."

"I told you in the note."

"You said something about us not being suited. That's a lot of balderdash. I want to know if you love me," Nigel demanded.

"Nigel, read my lips: *It will not work!*" she said, enunciating each word clearly and carefully.

"I think it will," he said calmly.

"I'm not cut out to live the civilized

kind of life you lead. I don't do small talk, and I don't hold up my pinky when I drink tea. And though I love you, I won't marry you and move into Merrick House with your father and stepmother. I won't be trapped in some Noel Coward play for the rest of my life."

"All right," Nigel said, "you've made your point. You shouldn't marry a man who can't accept you as you are. But have you looked around you lately? I am standing here in the middle of a crowd proposing marriage to you. Do I seem like the sort of chap who will object when you make a scene?"

"This is a temporary aberration," she assured him. "You'll think it over, and you won't do it again."

"Oh, that's wonderful. If this won't convince you, I don't know what will. All I can say is that I love you and I want you to come home with me. I don't know what else to do, Iris."

Exasperated, Nigel grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the crowd, down the street.

"I won't be yanked around like this," Iris yelled at him, breaking free. "And I won't marry you because it's convenient!"

"Convenient?" Nigel shouted back. "You think I want to marry you because it's convenient? Don't make me laugh! You're the most inconvenient, contrary woman I've ever met, and I can't imagine why the bloody hell I fell in love with you. But I did! And that makes me the biggest fool of all."

Iris watched him turn and stalk away from her before the significance of his words sank in.

Chasing him down the street and catching his arm, she asked, "You are going to rebuild Merrick House, aren't you?"

He looked down at her with a speculative gleam in his eye. "You think I need

your money, don't you? You may rest easy on that. I've already set the wheels in motion. I had money left me by my mother and money I've earned by the sweat of my brow. I never put my money into Merrick House before because putting money into anything that father has his fingers in is like pouring it down a well. But Father and Deborah are planning to move out of Merrick House. I'd gone to arrange for a flat in London for them while you were running out on me." So saying, he proceeded down the street.

Iris stood dazed in the middle of the busy sidewalk. Nigel had made plans for his father and stepmother to move to London. And he'd already set in motion his plans to rebuild Merrick House! That had to mean he wanted the two of them to transform that great pile of antique bricks into a real home, complete with children and laughter.

"You did all of this for me?" Iris called as she ran down the street in pursuit of him.

Nigel nodded and kept walking. "I most certainly did!"

Iris finally caught up with him again. She grabbed his arm and made him stop. Smiling up at him, she said, "I love you, Nigel. I'm sorry I ran out on you, but I was scared. Can you forgive me?"

Nigel grinned; would he ever be able to resist this imp? Not likely. "Of course I can," he said as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "I'm a patient fellow, remember? Just promise you won't ever run out on me again."

"I promise," Iris told him with a smile. "I'm going to stay with you and drive you crazy and make your life inconvenient and—"

"And I'm going to love every minute of it," Nigel promised just before his mouth covered her making it quit impossible for her to talk for sometime. ♥



Conspiracy of Hearts

Lisa Rollins is on the run with a handsome spy. He says his name is Eric, but how can Lisa believe anything he says? He claims that he's protecting her, but his mere presence is sweet torture . . .

PAT DALTON

From CONSPIRACY OF HEARTS by Pat Dalton. Copyright © 1987 by Pat Dalton. Published by The Berkley Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

“Am I in the right place to start a new Life?”

The voice startled brown-haired, hazel-eyed Lisa Rollins so that her pen jerked across the applicant file notes. She hadn't heard anyone come through the front of office.

The deep, velvety timbre of his voice intrigued her, but his question didn't bode well. Too often people thought that a new job would solve all their problems. Raising her eyes to see the man slanted in the

doorway of her private office at Danziger Personnel, she noted that he appeared fit and lean. His clipped sandy hair was tousled boyishly and his skin a deep tan. Despite his being dressed too casually to apply for the type of management position Lisa usually handled, he conveyed an aura of confidence.

“Sorry to startle you,” he began, then glanced at the brass nameplate on her desk, reading aloud, “Lisa Rollins, Manager. No one is in the reception area.”

"My secretary went home early with the flu." She rose and gestured toward the comfortable chair facing her desk. "Please come in, Mister—?"

"Jendeau." He gave the name a soft French pronunciation, then spelled, "J-E-N-D-E-A-U. John."

Peripherally, Lisa thought it might be nice to listen to him murmur French for the next hour, but she forced herself to scrutinize him professionally. Impossible to classify, she decided with an uncomfortable giggling as Mr. Jendeau sat down.

"I don't believe we had an appointment, Mr. Jendeau. Are you seeking employment?"

"Sort of."

Lisa held impatience at bay. "What type of position?"

He paused. "I don't know exactly. I was hoping you'd offer some suggestions."

"I'll be happy to." Lisa sensed that uncertainty was not among his usual characteristics. "Do you have a resume?"

"No. Maybe you could recommend the best approach for that also," he added, with disarming humility.

Minor exasperation. Why did these people always drop in at four-thirty P.M.?

"Let's start with your experience. What is your current position?"

He hesitated, glancing toward the door. Finally, seeming to summon inner determination, he answered, "Intelligence agent . . . or, to use the more popular public term, spy."

Lisa maintained her professional demeanor, saying merely, "I see."

Those two noncommittal words encouraged him to elaborate. "I don't want to be a spy anymore. At the ripe old age of thirty-four, I'm eager to embark on a new career. I just don't know what I want to be now that I'm grown up."

Although his words were bantering, his inflection held an undertone of serious-

ness. Lisa elected to accord him the usual respect and solemnity. "Maybe something in business security management, or law enforcement, although we don't handle that—"

"No," he interrupted politely. "I want out, completely. No more living in the shadows, or dealing with others who choose the shadows. Out. Something totally different."

"I'll make some notes on your qualifications," she offered, still doubtful, "and I can recommend a resume service."

"Almost half my life is shrouded in secrecy, Miss Rollins. I can't write on a resume that I've saved the world from partial or total destruction at least half a dozen times, because that information is classified."

Lisa suppressed an impulse to giggle.

He smiled slightly. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't?" With an innocent expression, she lifted her eyebrows as if considering that possibility for the first time.

"Does this happen often? A jaded spy dropping by to apply for a new career?"

"I can't say I've ever encountered anyone quite like you, Mr. Jendeau. But Danziger Personnel treats each applicant individually, with our full attention and efforts. I'm just not sure that we'll be able to help you. Still, you could generalize on your resume. For example, we could say you've gathered and analyzed data." She suggested the technique she'd developed for former military intelligence specialists.

"I understand." He nodded. "And for experience in interrogations and debriefings, we say something like 'gained expertise in interviewing individuals and evaluating their response.'"

"Exactly. You catch on fast."

"You're taking me seriously?"

"Aren't you serious?"

"Yes, I am. I've been thinking about leaving for several months, and today the urge to resign became overwhelming." He rose and began pacing back and forth in front of Lisa's desk. "Then, passing your building, I noticed the name Danziger Personnel. To be honest, I came in on a whim."

He stopped and leaned toward Lisa, pressing his palms against the top of her desk. "It's not a whim anymore. I'll be resigning for sure; then I'll be back."

The tension left his face. "Thank you for listening to me." He turned and strode toward the door, then looked back, saying softly, "You've been very kind, Miss Rollins . . . I assume it's Miss Rollins, since you're not wearing a wedding ring?"

Self-consciously, Lisa glanced down and confirmed that her left hand, resting on her lap beneath the desk, was currently concealed from his view. "Spy training?"

"Bachelor Practice 101." His lips at last loosened into a full grin, revealing a devilish dimple in his right cheek.

Leaving the office half an hour later, Lisa gasped in surprise as a male form unfolded beside her in the hall.

"Sorry to startle you again, Miss Rollins. When I started out earlier, I discovered that a couple of guys had been following me. They're still watching the building from across the street."

Could this man really be what he claimed? Lisa realized that her deepest instincts had been to believe him all along, but she had dismissed her intuition as an urge to add a little pizzazz to her typically humdrum day. Still uncertain, she asked, "Who are they?"

"I'm not sure."

"There is no back exit," Lisa said. "The only other door is on the side for the parking area."

"Do you have a car I could leave with you in?"

"Of course."

"It's best if I lay low tonight. Any suggestions?"

"You don't live in Los Angeles?" she asked.

"I live everywhere. But I don't *reside* anywhere."

"If we get you out of here I'll deliver you to the hotel of your choice. Maybe somewhere on the opposite side of this megalopolis?"

"How about your place?" The deep voice sounded matter-of-fact, with no undertone of seduction.

Lisa pondered the situation. It would certainly spice up her routine weekend call to her mother: "What have I been doing? . . . Oh, nothing much. Thursday night I hid a spy in my apartment . . . No, he wasn't classically handsome. Spies aren't supposed to stand out in crowds. But he was sort of attractive, and the timbre of his voice made me go all shivery . . ."

Of course, she couldn't frighten her middle-class, middle-aged, middle-thinking mother in Sierraville with an anecdote like that. She couldn't tell anybody. And although Lisa was not a blabbermouth, enforced silence crumbled half the fun.

For Lisa was having fun, she admitted to herself. Cops and robbers, good guys versus bad guys. While she had achieved a good degree of success in her career, and enjoyed a normal allotment of dates and dinners out and movies and plays, she'd be the first to acknowledge that her lifestyle was ordinary and staid. And that's how she wanted it—usually. But for one night . . .

"Do you have any spy ID?"

"Of course not. Carrying ID sort of spoils the undercover image if you're searched."

"Then how am I supposed to know—"

"Can't you trust your woman's intuition?"

Lisa hesitated, then said simply, "Okay, I'll sneak you out through the parking lot and you can sleep on my couch. For just one night."

An hour later they were sitting across from each other at Lisa's dining table.

"Best Chinese food I've had since Singapore," said John.

"When were you there?"

"Can't tell you. All I can say is that I work for NITA. That's the National Intelligence Tactical Agency—a small, little known agency that functions separately from, but in cooperation with, the CIA. We share some of the CIA's training facilities and have access to their documents."

The bantering rapport that had been enhancing their meal seemed to vaporize, leaving only a mystical, indefinable haze of sadness lingering beyond his eyes.

John stared into his teacup, "I'm afraid my past life was not for sharing, not while I was living it, not ever." Then his gaze lifted and flowed into Lisa's eyes. "But I want a future that can be shared."

If you have a future. Lisa's sudden thought fired terror into the base of her spine, as she remembered that John was here tonight because men had been following him.

Her mind was so knotted up by these thoughts that another question slipped out before she could stop it. "Does that mean there is no current Mrs. Spy?"

"Never has been."

His answer brought her immense pleasure, even as she was wondering whether to believe him.

"Never will be," he added.

She tried unsuccessfully to maintain a disinterested expression.

"What I mean," he hastened to explain, "is that if and when there is a Mrs., it won't be tagged on to Spy." He pushed back his chair, and his next question almost echoed her thoughts. "So what do

normal people do on an evening at home?"

A normal woman as attracted to a man as she was to him would be on the sofa by now instead of still sipping tea at the dining table.

"I guess they watch television," she answered. "But everything is reruns now."

"Well, I probably haven't seen any of it. They didn't show much current American television in—" he caught himself, "—where I was." He looked away. "You know," he said softly, "the other side should use you as a secret weapon. I haven't felt so inclined to talk to anyone in a very long time. And when that mood settles in, it's hard to keep your guard up all the time."

"I think it would be hard any time," she sympathized. What would it be like to have to examine every sentence before speaking it? And what a lonely lifestyle. So very lonely.

She went into the living room and snapped on the TV. John followed her. Then, changing her mind, she switched it off, saying, "How are you at Scrabble?" then kneeled to retrieve the Scrabble set from the cabinet.

John reached down, offering to help her up. It would have been rude not to accept. She placed her palm in his, and his fingers tightened about her hand as he pulled up. Her response was so warm that it gave her chills. She felt stimulated, yet comfortable. So right that she knew it must be wrong.

Then he leaned forward, bringing his lips closer to her waiting ones, which were moist and slightly parted.

Lisa stomped her foot. "Asleep!" she said abruptly. "My foot's asleep." Funny how easily a lie could pop out when you needed it. She twisted away from him, continuing to stomp her foot on the floor while gyrating in various directions as if doing an Indian rain dance. "All tingly." That wasn't a lie. Except it wasn't her foot

that was tingly.

"Let me help," he offered.

Help. That was a laugh. He'd started this whole thing. "Put your arm around my shoulder," he instructed.

She liked leaning against him. She liked it so much that she almost forgot which foot to limp on as he assisted her to the sofa and eased her down onto the cushions. Carefully, he slipped the pumps off her foot. "Left, was it?"

"Yes," she sighed. Then, "I mean, no. It was the right."

The gentle massage began at her arch but circulated throughout her body as his thumb exerted the slightest pressure in tiny circles.

By the time he reached her toes, she felt supine and helpless. Each toe was rated X. She was only vaguely aware that her breathing was heavy, her eyes half-closed.

"Feeling better?" he asked softly.

"Much," she managed to reply. Nobody does it better, she thought to herself, although in fact nobody had done this before at all.

He knelt down before her, tenderly returning her foot to the floor as if it were a fragile piece of china. He remained there, close, like a traditional suitor preparing to propose in a Victorian parlor.

Her heart hammered in her ears. Surely he must hear it. He placed his palm on top of her thigh, slowly spreading his fingers. She couldn't seem to stop him, not yet.

He stopped himself, rising slowly, reluctantly. The hand that had liquefied her thigh now bestowed a light caress over her hair.

"I believe you mentioned Scrabble," he said, with a catch in his deep voice.

They played until two in the morning, both reluctant to call it a night. Finally Lisa, the businesswoman, made herself break away. She couldn't believe how attracted she was to him — and so quickly!

Leaving John alone on the couch was one of the hardest things she'd ever done in her life.

Bright sunshine lighted her room when Lisa woke to a pounding on the front door. The clock showed eight-thirty A.M. She didn't have to be at her office for an hour.

Pulling on a robe, she hurried into the living room.

John was gone. The flowered sheets were neatly folded and lying atop the pillow on a corner of the sofa. He hadn't even left a note.

She started to turn the knob, then thought better of it. "Who is it?"

"Breakfast" was the muffled reply.

She yanked the door open eagerly. "John!"

"Mo," said the short, elderly man standing there, touching the tip of his blue cap imprinted with red letters: MEALS ON THE GO. He handed her a white paper bag. "Some guy tipped me big to bring you breakfast." He grinned. "Said it might take a while to wake you up. And he told me to give you this."

Mo handed Lisa a tiny note, then ambled back down the hallway.

She hurriedly read: *I would have fixed breakfast for you, but there wasn't anything in the kitchen to cook. Thanks for the sofa.*

That was it. So much for her exciting interlude. She'd probably never see him again.

The clock on Lisa's desk proclaimed three o'clock, ten minutes later than the last time she'd checked. She wasn't surprised that the day was dragging, after her exciting night. She glanced toward the door, almost as if she expected to see John standing there again.

Instead, two other men filled the doorway. Funny, she hadn't heard them come through the reception area. She double-

checked her appointment book, verifying that no one was scheduled now.

As always, Lisa did a quick preliminary evaluation. Both were plainly dressed in brown suits, with white shirts and brown shoes. The smaller man, whose black hair was thinning, wore a navy-blue tie. The larger had a crew cut that had all but totally eliminated his blond hair.

They seemed inseparable. Were they applying for a job where they'd work in tandem?

"Where's your boss, honey?" the big, burly one asked.

"I'm the branch manager, Lisa Rollins. May I help you?"

The smaller man acted like a shadow of the first. Quiet. Nervous.

The burly one reached into his jacket pocket, then tossed a snapshot onto Lisa's desk. "Know him?"

Picking up the photo, Lisa reacted as if it were a shard of dry ice, simultaneously freezing and burning her. The picture was of John, pausing in front of Danziger Personnel's office building, and had obviously been snapped without his knowledge.

All the will she could muster was concentrated on stopping her hand from trembling and maintaining an even tone of voice. She scarcely glanced at the photo before sitting it back on the desk. "Are you gentlemen seeking a new employee or applying for positions?"

With a loud sigh of impatience, Burly reached into his pocket once again, pulling out a small leather case. He flipped it open, flashed it in Lisa's direction, then slammed it shut as he said, "Special agents."

Lisa licked her lips, which were suddenly dry as the Sahara. Burly had purportedly shown her identification, whereas John had claimed that undercover agents didn't carry spy ID. Maybe Burly wasn't undercover. Maybe John had lied, although his explanation made sense.

Burly scrutinized her. "We asked a simple enough question. Do you know that man? We saw him enter this building yesterday, but we didn't see him come out."

Lisa pretended to relent, picking up the photo and studying it carefully.

Burly began to tap his fingers on the desktop.

"Maybe if you could tell me his name, or the type of work he does, I could see if there's anything in the files." She shrugged, feigning helplessness. "Of course, with my secretary gone today..."

"Come on. Let's try the other offices," said the small man, speaking for the first time, and they left as quickly as they had come in.

Later on, Lisa sat staring at the clock. Five twenty-eight. As she reached to dial the number of her friend Connie, a trembling motion of the lacy fern near the door caught her eye. Her muscles tautened involuntarily, and she slipped her drawer open and felt somewhat less vulnerable as her fingers closed around the ornate handle of her stainless-steel letter opener.

As she watched, a man's hand emerged, followed by a wrist encircled by a white French cuff, then a black sleeve. The left arm reached in and tugged on the right sleeve, then vice-versa, in that familiar movie gesture.

A rich voice announced in a British accent, "The name's Bond, John Bond."

John stepped fully inside, dressed in a black tuxedo, white silk shirt, and black tie.

"John!" Lisa's smile revealed all that she was feeling as she launched out of her chair and halfway across the room toward him. She stopped herself a few feet away. "I'm glad you're all right," she said primly.

"I'm fine."

"Attending a formal stakeout tonight?"

He bowed from the waist. "Would the

beautiful Lisa Rollins, Manager, do John Jendeau the great honor of supping with him tonight at a place where normal people dine?"

Lisa's reply cloaked her giddy delight. "You think normal people wear tuxedos to dinner?"

"Well, it is Friday night." He displayed an exaggerated frown. "Are you telling me you're ashamed to be seen with me in a getup like this? That's too bad, because I'm really ready to eat. That's the trouble with Chinese food. You have it for dinner, and a day later you're hungry again."

"Speaking of last night's takeout meal, since when can you be seen in public, in a tuxedo or otherwise?" she teased.

But suddenly she realized this was serious. Very serious. "Oh, my God—You shouldn't be here. You're supposed to be hiding or something."

"It's okay tonight," he casually assured her.

"No, it isn't. They were here today looking for you, the two men. They might still be around. They could come bursting in here any minute. Or find you someplace else."

Devastation was evident in his tone and the slump of his shoulders. "Are you making this up just to get rid of me?" he finally asked.

Lisa sighed. He had to believe her in order to understand that he was actually in peril. And maybe the best way to convince him was to answer honestly.

"I don't want to get rid of you," she murmured. He looked as if he wanted to draw her into his arms, but then he backed away. He began interrogating her, insisting that she repeat her story and the description of the two men.

"I've told you four times. That's it!" she yelled at him finally. "If you want to go out there like a stupid sheep among the wolves, go ahead. Count me out." She flopped down in the armchair in front of

her desk.

"Your story's been the same every time," he said.

"Goody for me. I'm consistent."

"I guess I have to believe you, and you know what that makes me."

"A gullible spy?" Sarcasm dripped from her remark.

"A world-class superjerk."

She swiveled around in the chair, meeting his gaze, and an incongruous urge to take him comfortingly in her arms surged through her. She quickly looked away.

"Lisa," he went on with a catch in his voice, "it means I've accidentally involved you in something real, something that could be very dangerous."

He laid his hand on her shoulder so gently that she might not have been sure it was there except for the throbbing warmth suffusing her.

"Please," he said agitatedly. "Please believe me, now of all times, when I tell you that I would never knowingly have involved any civilian, particularly not you."

But she couldn't believe him, not about anything. Maybe the real agents were the two who had come to her office this afternoon. Maybe she'd helped the wrong man.

He correctly interpreted her silence. His hand slipped down her arm in a slow caress. "I'd better get going," he said.

Lisa rose from the chair and turned toward him. He was closer than she'd realized. "I guess this means dinner's off," she joked weakly.

Their gazes melded together. Her breathing quickened, matching the tempo of his.

"Be careful," she said. Her words floated to him on the cloud of a sigh.

"Isn't there supposed to be a kiss at the end of the final scene?" he said, lowering his mouth to hers, and the first brush of his lips sent tiny flames sizzling through her.

Gently, he drew her into his arms. "Let me hold you," he whispered, "for just a moment . . ."

She cradled against the smooth fabric of his jacket, feeling the cool texture of silk against her neck. Then she lifted her face to his, and he claimed her with a kiss that seemed to demand a lifetime of fulfillment yet was ever so tender.

A moment later he pulled away. "I must go now," he said. "I'll try to call you." And he closed the door behind him.

I'll try to call you. And if he didn't, would that mean merely that he wasn't interested in her?

She hurried to the window. John strode past, alarmingly conspicuous wearing a tuxedo in Encino, California at six P.M. on a sunny August evening. Clearly, he had donned the outfit to charm her.

Lisa waited another hour to leave the office, hoping to minimize any semblance of a connection between her and John if anyone was watching.

As she unlocked her car door in the parking lot, a form moved on the rear floorboard.

Although she was already backing away, she wasn't out of range of the businesslike revolver Burly was pointing in her direction. Not at her exactly, but the gun was in his hand.

He motioned for her to get in.

"Want to ask me some more questions?" she said, trying to banish the tremor from her voice as she slipped into the driver's position.

Burly's bulk seemed even bigger, scrunched into her back seat. "You can drop the act, Toots. Drive to your apartment. Just in case my partner loses your boyfriend, he might turn up there."

"My boyfriend? I don't know who you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the man who's calling himself John Jendeau, at least this

week."

Lisa bristled at his insinuation that John had been lying. "I know no such man," she managed.

"Save your breath. We had electronic listeners scoping the entire building this afternoon. We heard it all, including the nonverbal parts."

"You bugged my office? Isn't that illegal?" Lisa asked, irate at the invasion of privacy.

Burly didn't bother to answer. "Go straight home. Don't try any fancy routes."

Lisa tried to control the quavering of her hand as she unlocked the door of her condominium.

Burly motioned to a chair as soon as they were inside. "Sit down. Over there. By the phone."

Lisa eased into the armchair he'd indicated. Every muscle, every sinew in her body was knotted up. "I don't know why you're intimidating an innocent citizen."

Burly sniggered. "We aren't sure how innocent you are. Now, when your boyfriend calls, invite him over. Be sure you promise to make it worth his while to come."

So that was it. They'd heard John say he might call.

"Hey," Burly said suddenly, after about fifteen minutes of excruciating silence, "I'm hungry. Order out for pizza."

Lisa dialed and then had to wait ten minutes on hold before she could even place the order. Half an hour later, the downstairs buzzer finally sounded.

Burly nodded toward the intercom. "Ask who it is."

"Who is it?" she asked the metal box.

"Deliveryman," was the answer.

"Buzz him up," Burly said. He rummaged in his pocket, handed her a twenty dollar bill then followed her to the door. He flattened himself—as much as a man

his size could be flattened—at the side, so he'd be concealed when the door was open. Unbuttoning his jacket, he caught the lapel behind his shoulder holster. His hand twitched as he brought his arm across his chest, ready to draw his revolver if necessary.

Lisa opened the door.

A tall deliveryman stood before her, his face obstructed by a huge bouquet of yellow roses held high in front of him. "Roses for Lisa Rollins."

She wondered if they were from John, and hoped, if so, he hadn't enclosed a card with any information as to his whereabouts. Her ex-boyfriend Nick had sent flowers for a while after she'd ended their relationship, but not in the last three months. Oddly, she recalled, she'd broken off with Nick after he'd lied to her about some minor matter. Now she'd gotten herself involved, for a day anyway, with a man who lied for a living. But John prevaricated with style.

You're one crazy lady, she told herself. As she reached out to take the bouquet, she stifled a gasp. John's face was revealed behind the foliage.

He grinned and wriggled his eyebrows. "Do I get a tip?"

"I . . . I . . ." She rolled her eyes toward the side of the door, afraid her genuinely panicked expression might not be enough. "I'll get my purse," she stammered.

John's grin vanished. He understood something was wrong.

Lisa backed into the room. "I know my purse is here somewhere . . ."

She sensed John behind her, following her in. Any moment he would confront Burly, but she feared that John couldn't take him alone.

As John left the cover of the door, and Burly reached for his gun, Lisa whomped Burly across the face with the bouquet as hard as she could, sorry that the thorns had been removed. Burly grabbed at his face

to try to shove the flowers away. John rushed him.

Someone was sneezing.

John snatched a crystal vase off the hutch, hitting Burly on the side of the head. Almost a love tap, but it served to stun Burly long enough for John to wrestle him to the floor and immobilize his hands behind his back with handcuffs from Burly's own pocket.

"Excuse me for dropping by without calling, but your line was busy," John said to her over his shoulder.

Burly was coming around to full consciousness again. The first thing out of his mouth was a sneeze. Then another, and another. In between, he managed to wheeze out, "Allergic . . . roses."

John removed Burly's gun from its holster and placed it on the dining room table. Then he hauled Burly up by his lapels, propping him against the wall, and asked, "How you doin', Dwight?"

"Dwight?" Lisa blurted out.

"We sort of went to school together," John explained.

At the same time, Dwight mumbled in answer to John's question, "Miserable." His fleshy features had sprung leaks everywhere, with heavily watering eyes and runny nose.

"Good," John replied. Picking up one of the battered blossoms, he dangled it a foot above Dwight's nose. "Now, tell me what this is all about."

The responding aaaaaachooooo practically blew Lisa off her feet. Dwight sniffled. "You have to come with me. Her, too," he said drippily to John.

"You're hardly in a position to demand that." John straightened up and tossed the flower aside. Removing Dwight's handkerchief from his pocket, he caught a thick silver button that tumbled into his hand. He dropped it on the floor, stomped on it, then ground it with his heel. "Killing a bug," he muttered. "That's an electronic

tracer, so they can find Dwight if he loses himself."

A few efficient minutes later, John had gagged Dwight, then tied his legs together and anchored them to the dining room table. He'd even fashioned gargantuan earmuffs from two towels folded over each ear and fastened by a third towel tied under Dwight's chin, so Dwight couldn't overhear his conversation with Lisa. What showed of Dwight's face, besides a ruby-red nose and watery eyes, was saggingly depressed. He looked like a fugitive from Mother Goose gone awry.

A belated shudder of fear spiraled through Lisa. "Now that he's taken care of, we can call the police," she said, picking up the telephone. She'd poked in only the first two digits of 911 when John pulled the receiver out of her hand and hung up.

"No police," he said taking a step closer. "Now go into the bedroom."

Lisa's eyes widened in alarm as she realized she'd obviously been helping the wrong man! Why else would he not allow the police to be called? What a romantic fool she was.

She stood frozen in place for several seconds, silently refusing to obey his command, biting back a verbal challenge while she debated her options. Then she recognized that the bedroom did offer certain possibilities.

She pivoted and strolled into the bedroom, with John close behind. Lisa spotted her chosen weapon on top of the oak dresser on the far side of the room—a silver can of aerosol hair spray. If she could surprise and temporarily incapacitate him, maybe she could get to Dwight's revolver.

John closed the bedroom door.

She ambled toward the bureau, chattering, "I must look a mess. I bet I don't have any lipstick on, and my hair—" She picked up her brush, flipping it through her hair.

"I didn't think you were the type to worry about your hairdo at a time like this," he commented derisively.

She was ready for the hair spray, wrapping her fingers tightly around the cylindrical can.

Drat. He kept trekking back and forth. A moving target.

She needed to gauge the distance, locate him precisely to plan her best aim. Leaning forward, she looked in the mirror. A deceptively calm face stared back at her. Who was that cool brunette in the linen suit?

A portion of John's tall form came into view within the oak frame.

He was tossing clothes from her closet into her suitcase, which was gaping open on top of the bedspread.

"You're taking me hostage?" she asked sarcastically.

"Hostage?" He raised his cognac-colored eyes and appeared surprised at encountering the green sparks in hers.

For a moment Lisa thought she saw hurt and vulnerability, but that window to his soul was shuttered an instant later.

"I've gotten you into this mess. I just assumed you'd come with me until it blows over," he said in a crisp, matter-of-fact tone.

"Sure. Every little girl dreams of becoming a moll when she grows up," Lisa retorted tartly.

"So that's the way you feel." He bit off the words as he left the room.

Lisa didn't release her grip on the hair spray even though she was hoping to hear the sound of the front door slamming behind John. She hurried to the telephone on her nightstand and once again had dialed two-thirds of 911 before John returned. Glancing up, Lisa saw Dwight's gun in his hand.

Even though he hadn't yet pointed it at her, she knew she couldn't spray the sticky aerosol fast enough to clog the fir-

ing mechanism before he could pull the trigger.

She dropped the telephone receiver back into place.

"Who were you calling?"

"The police."

John's look was haunted. He dropped the gun on the bed. "Since you're so convinced I'm the bad guy, why did you help me?"

She hesitated, uncertain of the answer. "What I'm realizing now," she finally concluded aloud, "is that maybe you're both bad guys."

John dropped his penetrating gaze, looking at the carpet as he said softly, "You're right. I *am* a bad guy."

Lisa drew in her breath in shock. It wasn't just that she hadn't expected him to admit it so readily, but now she recognized that she'd clung to one last fiber of hope that she was wrong, and that he could convince her that he normally wore a white hat atop that thick sandy hair and kept a white stallion parked outside.

"A bad guy . . ." John was continuing, ". . . an awful jerk, a terrible creep, a sleazeball . . . Anything you want to call me for being such an idiot as to get you involved in this, even unknowingly."

She vowed to smother the beginnings of feelings that had been kindling within her for the past twenty-four hours. "John, I'm not going anywhere with you."

"But it's the only way I can try to keep you safe now." He didn't look at her while he spoke.

"Why? What's going on?"

"I don't have most of the facts myself, and I'm only guessing at the rest."

Lisa sighed and sat down on the bed. "I read enough novels to grasp that in classified work, there's a specification of 'need to know.'"

He ran his fingers through his hair. "Lisa, I can't tell you—"

"Let's start with Dwight," she inter-

rupted. "Whose side is he on?"

"I don't know," John answered. He began to pace back and forth like a trapped animal. "Okay," he relented finally. "I guess you have a right to a few facts."

Lisa sat waiting for his explanation.

"I wasn't kidding when I said that Dwight and I went to school together. We were both in a NITA special training course for one week. His presence here complicates things. I don't know whether he's working for the other side now, or whether someone has set me up to look like a traitor to NITA, or whether some maverick within NITA is out to get me for some purpose of his own."

"Why don't you just call your boss and find out?"

"Because if I've been set up, I need to be free to clear myself. And if it involves one particular case I've been pursuing, mostly on my own, for the last several months, it's a political hot potato. I need to gather every shred of proof I can find before taking it to the top."

When his pacing brought him back to her end of the room, he broke the pattern to come close to her. "Don't you see, Lisa, I don't know who's after me—us—now. So I can't request help from NITA or the police."

"How can I be sure you didn't stage this to persuade me to go away with you?" she said, half-jokingly.

"Lisa, you can't believe I would ever deliberately terrorize you?"

Lisa glanced at the telephone again.

John followed her thoughts. "You can take your chances with the police. But federal authority supersedes local authority. And if enemy agents are involved, the police can't protect you forever."

"But I don't know anything about any of this!" she pointed out.

"You might have a tough time convincing the powers that be of that."

"I can't just run off with you!" she ex-

claimed in exasperation. "I have a good job, a mother to call every weekend.

For the next few minutes, Lisa reviewed her options, discussing some, but not all of them, aloud with John. She couldn't stay with a friend or relative without risking involving them, too. And holing up in some strange motel alone didn't particularly appeal to her. If she didn't remain with John, how would she know how this all turned out and when it would be safe for her to resurface?

She tried to avoid admitting, even to herself, that there were less practical reasons why she didn't want to part from John.

Half an hour later, her suitcase stowed in the trunk, John steered Lisa's yellow Cutlass out of the condominium parking lot.

"Dwight implied that John isn't your real name, not that I ever thought it was," she said, "And the Jendeau was cute but obvious."

"We don't use real names even with other agents in NITA."

"Since I'm running away with you, don't you think I should know who you are?" Lisa prodded.

He glanced in the rearview mirror. "I thought you'd accepted me as I am."

"I accepted the situation for the time being. I had no choice."

"I see. So your being with me now is purely circumstantial."

"Absolutely."

He stopped the car at a right light and turned to her. "My real name," he said, "is Eric Trevor."

"Sure it is," Lisa replied, "just like John was. But Eric sounds much more dashing, so I'll call you Eric from now on."

He took an erratic route, making a number of turns through residential streets. "Nobody's following us," he finally confirmed.

"Good. Now maybe you'll tell me what we're going to do."

"First we have to gather some money. Do you have any bank cash cards?"

Lisa nodded reluctantly.

"Well, we'll have to use them. I'll pay you back later. Then we'll stop at the post office and you can send letters to your employer and your family."

"And what do you propose I tell them?"

"Tell your boss that you've been called away indefinitely due to a relative's illness. Tell your family that you're trekking across the country with a friend."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "I can't believe I'm actually doing this!"

Eric looked at her seriously. "I can't think of any other alternative. I really can't."

"Okay, but where are we heading for now?"

"Arizona first, hopefully in a camper. I have some undercover work I have to complete there, then we'll move on."

"Where?"

"First things first, sweet. You're just going to have to let me play it by ear. Now where's the first bank?"

Their errands took them several hours. As darkness fell over the Los Angeles smog, Eric pulled into the parking lot of a McDonald's.

They ate in the car, and Eric suggested that Lisa try to sleep in the back seat. A long while later, she awoke to the early morning sun burning her face through the glass of the Buick's rear window. She sat up, rubbing and stretching cramped muscles while taking a minute to get oriented. The front seat was empty.

She looked around the parking lot, then saw Eric standing in a nearby phone-booth, and walked over to him. He was holding a folded newspaper, and he hung up the phone as she approached.

"Do you have any quarters?" he asked. "We have to start responding to classified

ads. We're going to buy a camper."

After spending the night stuffed in the backseat of a car, Lisa was in an ugly mood and felt disinclined to give him so much as a wooden nickel. "Tell me what the phone call was about."

"It wasn't important," he mumbled.

Lisa thrust out her arm, palm upturned. "Give me my cash cards back, then I'll get out of here and make my own way."

His head popped up as if jerked by a puppeteer. Astonishment pulsed through his words. "I thought we were sticking together."

"It would take more than the world's supply of Super Glue to make me stick with you." Lisa stomped closer to him, fury gleaming green in her eyes. "I won't be treated like excess baggage in the back of a car. I don't go where I'm not wanted."

"Who," he asked, bemused, "do you think doesn't want you?"

"You," she sputtered. "Eric Trevor, or whoever you are in this particular millisecond."

A range of emotions played across his features. "You're wrong," he said, so softly she almost couldn't hear him. "I do want you along. Too much." Reaching forward in slow motion, his finger moved to her parted lips, tracing the outline. She leaned toward him. Gradually, he withdrew his hand.

"We have business to take care of," he pronounced in clipped tones. Then he added with a hint of the lightness that had characterized their early acquaintance, "Fate of the world, and all that stuff."

Lisa snapped back to her senses. "This crew doesn't weigh anchor without being told what's going on; remember I've got the keys to our gallant vessel."

"Lisa—"

"Let's start with who you called."

He relented. "I guess there's no reason not to tell you, except that I'm not used to reporting every detail."

"Start getting used to it."

"Well, for this once . . ." He kicked up a chunk of ground. "I took the risk of calling my former superior, now retired, who had been a protégé of my father's in the OSS during World War Two. I'm trying to figure out whether I've been set up and by whom."

"And?" she prodded.

"And his conversation was exceedingly casual and non-committal." He expelled a deep sigh. "To double-check, I also called a friend who's with the FBI, currently assigned to Honolulu. Maybe I should have let you apply your woman's intuition on that one. She was trying to communicate with me in some personal code that I can only guess at, but I'm sure she was warning me of something."

Then, abruptly, he added, "Maybe it would be best if we picked some obscure spot for you to stay alone."

Did she discern an echo of regret in his remark?

"I considered that possibility last night in the back of the car." She swallowed back the emotions welling in her throat. "But then I wouldn't know what happened to you."

"That would matter to you?"

She nodded. "And I don't know how safe I'd be on my own."

A siren screamed along the intersecting street.

"Omigosh, we've got to get out here. They must have traced your calls." She wrenched open the car door and threw herself in, then waited for Eric to join her.

He ambled around the front of the car, and languidly slid into the driver's seat. "Isn't it a little late for you to think of that? After all this time withholding car keys and all?"

A police car, lights flashing, sped past the intersection.

Lisa's eyes narrowed. "How did you know they weren't after us?" she ground

out.

"The odds. Apart from the fact that I telephoned the home numbers of two friends they may not have tapped yet, I went through a lengthy series of different long distance dialing codes in several cities."

"You never did tell me your final conclusions after talking to your friends."

"No solid conclusions. But my guess is that I have been set up to look like a traitor to NITA. They probably just want to question me at this point, but there's always somebody who could get trigger happy in a pinch. I need to gather the proof to clear myself."

"What if you're on the wrong track?"

"I'd like to finish up the case I was investigating on my own anyway. Even if it's not connected, it's important." He gazed out the window. "I think we're on the run from two sides—NITA, and whoever set me up."

"Who could that be?" Lisa asked.

"In fifteen years with NITA, there are a lot of possibilities."

"Fifteen years? Then you were a spy at age nineteen."

"A little extracurricular activity on campus."

Lisa stared at his troubled face. Here she was becoming emotionally attached to a wandering spy! Could Eric ever lead a normal life after so many years of posing as somebody else?

"Do you have any quarters?" His question broke into her thoughts. "We really have to find a camper."

Lisa was asleep. A deep baritone voice filled her ears, singing of Phoenix and the end of a love affair.

She didn't remember setting the clock radio.

It was a nice, caressing voice. She didn't particularly want to turn it off. Maybe she'd wake up just to listen.

She blinked a few times. Eric's topaz eyes stared straight back at her. He was dressed as a cowboy, in jeans, a red plaid shirt, and hand-tooled boots.

She sat bolt upright in the back of the camper. She rubbed her eyes and ran her fingers through her hair. "Does your choice of lyrics mean we're in Phoenix?"

"We're in Arizona. Near the Supersition Mountains. At a campground. And dinner's ready."

"I told you to wake me so we could switch driving," Lisa reminded him, wondering how he'd managed to stay awake for over thirty-six hours straight.

Earlier in the day he had insisted that she nap while he drove, but she hadn't expected to doze so many hours.

Twilight lingered for a long time in the Arizona sky, and as they sat outside finishing dinner, Eric explained that he was certain no one had followed them. "Just in case, though, one of us should watch for anyone asking questions. It'll have to be you, at least for a couple of hours. I can't keep my eyes open."

"No wonder. You haven't slept in almost forty hours," Lisa said sympathetically. "Of course I'll take the first watch."

Lisa managed to stay awake through the night, reading magazines and a paperback thriller retrieved from trashcans at the camper park. When the determined sun had burned off the last pink vestiges of dawn, Lisa stepped outside to stretch her limbs.

Then she heard to camper door open, and there appeared a man she found it difficult to recognize at first. She couldn't stop the giggles from erupting as he walked toward her, wearing sunglasses and skin-tight jeans.

"What do you think?" asked Eric.

"Ricardo Montalban you're not," she teased. In fact, he looked wonderful. But he didn't much resemble John/Eric, the

person she was beginning to care for.

"Excuse me." He feigned emotional injury. "This is my very best Latin-lover look."

She noticed that the Latin lover wore tennis shoes.

"Where are we going today?" she asked.

"I was planning on meeting with someone near here." He paused before adding cryptically, "I'm off to see a coyote."

"A coyote?"

"That's right."

"Hey," she said, trying to be a good sport, "why don't we both go?" What if she never saw him again?

"You can't come," he replied evenly.

"I've got a pretty long walk into the Superstition Mountains." After a minute he added softly, "I'll only be gone a few hours. You take it easy here."

Lisa couldn't, and of course shouldn't, say everything she was feeling. But one whisper did escape her lips. "Be careful."

All day long, Lisa worried. She did laundry, glad to do something and she tried to nap in the afternoon so that she could be fresh enough to either keep watch or do the driving tonight, but worry about Eric constantly jagged through her mind like streaks of lightning warning of a storm ahead. Finally she dozed off.

The sun hung low in the western sky when she awoke, but there was no sign in the camper that Eric had returned.

Suddenly, she felt she had to do something. Eric must be in trouble.

She put on jeans, a shirt, and tennis shoes, then left a note in case Eric returned. She stopped at the campground office in the hope of getting some map or verbal directions.

"Better not be headin' off into them hills this late in the day," the campground manager warned her.

After an extended exchange of conver-

sation convinced him that she intended to go anyway, he sold her a map of main roads and described a couple of hiking trails.

"Best way in though," he said at last, "would be by Jeep. It can go places your camper can't, and cover a lot more ground than your feet. Got one out back I can rent you."

Lisa followed him, then asked casually, "Is there any particular place where one might go to see a coyote?"

"Depends," he said, "on whether you're lookin' for the two-legged kind or the four-legged. I reckon a pretty lady like you ought to stick with the four-legged kind. Them other kind's the dangerous ones."

After more questioning, Lisa learned that *coyote* was a nickname for persons who led groups of illegal aliens from across the Mexican border, and that most coyotes were unprincipled exploiters of those they purported to help—dangerous to their own charges, and even more so to anyone who approached them.

She also learned that the Superstition Mountains remained a mysterious and violent place, and that it wasn't uncommon for people who entered these depths never to come out again. Old West shootouts still occurred, particularly in the seeking and defending of gold. "Tenderfeet" crossed paths with aged prospectors who'd wandered these hills for scores of years, all seeking the fabled Lost Dutchman Mine.

She dared not say she was looking for someone, so she concocted a story about being a reporter, wanting her big break from the society page into the news page, with an investigative report on coyotes.

After a good deal of hesitation and reluctance on the manager's part, Lisa managed to wheedle some general suggestions as to which direction to search.

Driving a few miles toward the stone

outcroppings in the distance, Lisa traversed back and forth through a maze of canyons and cliffs, guiding the Jeep to pick its way over the boulder-strewn hills. It was hotter than Hades.

The sun sank lower and lower, threatening to hide behind a distant cliff. Lisa glanced at it with trepidation, then looked back the other way.

A glint caught her eye. What was that?

There it was again. A brief flash in the distance. Could it be a signal of some kind?

She turned the Jeep east, feeling more than a little apprehension. What if she stumbled onto a group of coyotes or crazed prospectors?

But she had to find Eric. She reached beneath the front seat, bringing up a tire iron she'd found earlier. Placing that beside her, she continued toward the occasional glints that were becoming fewer as the sun was disappearing.

Nearing the spot, she felt hemmed in, trapped. She was surrounded by rocky hills on three sides. The giant stones seemed to twist into horrific shapes, looming over her like malicious monsters escaped from a nightmare.

"Up here!" a man's voice called out.

Lisa would have recognized those deep tones anywhere.

Getting out of the jeep and scrambling up the slope, she saw that the Latino version of Eric was sprawled flat on his back amid piles of rocks, almost as if he were reclining there to enjoy a view of the canyon. "Lisa, be careful!" he yelled. "These rocks may let loose again."

Her foot slipped on some pebbles, causing her to slip back a few inches, but as she neared, Eric's note of concern changed. "Lisa, what the hell are you doing here?"

Obviously he was all right. He could ask stupid questions in an infuriating manner.

"*Buenos dias, compadre,*" she forced herself to joke. "I just happened to be in the neighborhood. Are you hurt?"

"I'm just pinned down. Get me out of here."

"My, my. A little old landslide certainly makes one irascible. And you didn't care who you signaled, did you?" She gestured toward the pocket mirror in his free right hand. "Carry that along to check your makeup?"

"It's a good thing I had it along. You never would have noticed me."

Lisa saw that his left arm was trapped with a small boulder in a space so narrow that he couldn't pull his hand out. And he couldn't roll over because a larger boulder was pinning his right pant leg. It was a miracle that he hadn't been injured worse.

"I'd met my contact," he said, "and was on my way back when this happened. I should have been able to outrun it. I guess my reflexes have slowed down in my old age."

His reflexes had slowed down, Lisa realized, because his ratio of sleeping hours to wide-awake hours was less than ten percent since the morning he'd first left her apartment. She stepped closer to better analyze how to free him.

After a minute she said, "I brought water in the Jeep, and I think the tire iron will give me the leverage to roll these boulders enough for you to get loose."

While she returned to the Jeep, then back to Eric, her anger had time to outpace her other emotions. Still, she was tempted to nestle his head in her lap and hold the Thermos cup to his lips so he could sip the waer. But she persuaded herself to hold back, instead filling the cup and placing it in his right hand.

"That's pure nectar," he said gratefully after drinking.

"Feeling better?" she asked in her most chipper manner.

"Much. Now—"

"Now you can tell me everything about what you're doing here on this mountain, what we're doing in Arizona at all, why we're going wherever we're going, et cetera," she said firmly. "I want to know whatever you know. Let's start with whom you met today, why, and what you found out."

"Stop fooling around and get me out of here."

She glanced toward the sky, which was decked out in the peaches and pinks of early sunset. "Pretty soon it will be too dark to find our way out of here."

"There are other people involved," he said seriously.

"Including me," she asserted. "No one could be more involved than I am—thanks to you."

"These other people, other innocent people like you, have been assured of my confidentiality."

"I have a need to know. We're partners in this now."

"Partners? Since when? Spies don't work in pairs, like nuns. Not at my level."

"You're accomplishing a lot at the moment," she pointed out.

"If I knew anything definite, I'd go to the authorities."

"You *are* the authorities," she reminded him. "Or so you've told me."

"You know I meant higher authorities."

"Considering our respective positions right now," she pointed out as she towered above him, "that's me."

Still he didn't answer, so she turned away. "I'll check back in the morning to see whether you've changed your mind."

"Lisa, stop kidding around," he ordered angrily.

She didn't look back as she walked down the hill, tossed the tire iron into the front seat, and started the motor.

"You're bluffing," he called out, a little more uncertainly.

She shifted into gear and began to pull

away.

"Lisa," he shouted, "you can't leave me here."

"Why not?" she yelled back. "You probably couldn't be safer. Not too many people would look for you here."

"But I'll get thirsty again," he said in a dignified but pleading manner calculated to garner sympathy from a heart of marble.

She slammed on the brakes, turned off the motor, retrieved the tire iron, and climbed back up to him. "Okay. You've convinced me."

She sat down on a nearby boulder, staring at him.

"Gee whiz, you really do care," he said.

"Of course, I do, darn you," she snapped. Then a sob escaped her. She sniffled back the deluge of emotions threatening to inundate her. "And I want to help you, help both of us."

"I care for you, too," he murmured, with a catch in his voice. "And I want to protect you," he added. "Although you could point out that I'm not doing a very good job at the moment."

"Some things work better with two than with one," she said. She moved toward him, kneeling at his side and searching his face. "I came along to be of some value, to you and to myself. You're not permitting me to do much. Either let me in, or I'm getting out completely."

He closed his eyes as if to blot out reality for a moment. Then he murmured, "I don't want you to go. I want you to stay with me for even more reasons than originally."

Tentatively, she touched her fingertips to his. When he didn't pull back, she wrapped her hand around his. "Then help me to be able to stay."

His answer was haltingly spoken. "I've spent most of my life learning not to trust anyone." His amber eyes looked deeply into hers as he said his next words with

difficulty. "Maybe you're the person to teach me to trust."

"You can trust me Eric," she murmured. "Always." But she didn't verbalize her own reservations that she couldn't trust him. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

While she worked to free him, Eric's story finally emerged. He suspected that a right-wing dictator in a Latin American country might have framed him for something. The dictator might have discovered that Eric was piecing together information about his operations, about even more questionable activities than our own government was aware of. So he needed to discredit or eliminate Eric.

Eric planned to contact various people to confirm and support his conclusions, including legal immigrants, illegal aliens, and other informants. They would be taking a southern route across the United States while Eric made those contacts. Today he had met with a coyote who had put him in touch with a group of persons who were political refugees, illegally entering the United States from that Latin American country.

"I'm glad you finally told me all this. I know you resent my questioning you all the time . . ."

"No, Lis, you've got it wrong." He ran his hand over his head in exasperation. "It's myself I resent, myself I hate, for getting you into this. I know I've seemed cold sometimes, maybe even cruelly so. But that's part of the act—believe me, some of the most challenging acting I've ever done. I thought it was best for you that we not get involved."

"So we're not involved," she whispered.

"Oh, Lisa!" Her name escaped his lips in an urgent sigh. "I'm not right for you. Not now. Maybe not ever."

She realized as he spoke those words that he was exactly the right man for her—John, Eric, whoever he was. She cared for

him; and she wanted him.

"Don't spies have some sort of creed," she murmured, "about living for today?"

"We try to make sure," he answered softly, with a thousand emotions wrapped around his words, "that there's a tomorrow."

She moved even closer to him now. "Then it must be employment-agency managers who believe in living for today, no matter what."

"Lisa, please don't tempt me. I'm not made of stone."

"I know that now." She tentatively brushed her lips against one of his cheeks, then the other and slowly slipped her arms around his neck.

His arms encircled her gradually, then tightened, pulling her closer. He kissed her hungrily, with days of pent-up emotions expressed through his questing lips. "Oh, darling." His breath fanned her ear. "I've wanted to hold you like this for so long, a lifetime it seems." He moved his hands. "And to touch you like this . . ."

She gasped in pleasure, clenching her fingers into the muscles of his back.

"Darling," he managed to say through ragged breathing, "we can't stay here much longer." His hands tapered away from her, moving down her sides until he forced her away. "When I make love to you, it will be in a more comfortable setting."

She noticed he said *when* he made love to her, not *if*. With the greatest difficulty, she controlled her urge to beg for his continued caresses.

They alternated driving and sleeping for two more days. Eric made successful stops along the Gulf Coast and met with additional contacts along the New Orleans waterfront.

Now he parked the camper, took Lisa's left hand in his, produced a plain gold band from his pocket, and slipped it on her

finger.

Huskily, he said, "I want to stay in a hotel tonight. And I think we should register as Mr. and Mrs."

He continued to hold her hand, matching his pulse to hers, which was racing at double its usual rate, echoing the passion pounding through her veins in response to him.

At last he gently reached over to open the passenger door. "It's almost five. Our room should be ready."

"Are you sure it will be all right for us to stay in a hotel here in New Orleans?"

"I think we can take the risk. Everything's pretty much wrapped up except for one final destination to pull together the last of the evidence. I want to have that nice, tight lid to top it off."

The small hotel he had selected was in the Vieux Carre, where cobbled sidewalks, flower vendors, and intricately scrolled wrought-iron balconies genteelly proclaimed the French Quarter.

The bellman showed them to a spacious room and pulled open the curtains to their private balcony. Lisa glanced self-consciously at the bed, then at Eric. But he was busy tipping the bellman.

Eric stalked across the room and pulled the curtains almost shut, permitting a little late-afternoon sunlight into the room.

"We can go out if you want to," he offered. "We could risk being seen in public now. Or we could have dinner here."

"I want to stay here, where we can just be us," Lisa said.

Her meaning wasn't lost on him. "You're sure?" he asked softly, his eyes searching hers.

"Very."

"Well then"—he trailed his finger along the length of her nose—"why don't you go shower while I order dinner?"

When Lisa emerged from the shower, she dressed in a filmy dress.

Then they dawdled over dinner on the balcony. From a saxophone somewhere below, smoky jazz snaked upward and coiled around them. The blues, Lisa reflected. Lost loves. Displaced lives. Shattered hopes.

But Lisa determined to focus only the sensuality of the poignant notes, not on loss or sadness.

"How about a dance?" Eric asked softly.

The perfect seduction scene, Lisa thought, smiling. The smile held as Eric stepped over and pulled her into his arms, swaying to the slow tempo. She melted against him, feeling as if they were evaporating together, perhaps drifting skyward along with those smoky notes.

His lips nuzzled her ear, and she turned her face for his kiss. His hands mastered hers, sending all her senses reeling again and again. He caressed her back, then moved his hands slowly, sensuously along her arms until he held both her hands in his.

He ran his fingers over the golden ring. "You didn't take this off; I see," he murmured huskily.

Emotions welled within her, but she answered evenly, "I thought it best to keep up appearances. I haven't forgotten that it's disposable."

"'With this ring, I thee bed' isn't all I'd like to offer you," he whispered. "But it's all I can offer you for now."

Her lips quivered next to his. "It's enough." For now, she added silently. And if this was all there was to be, the memory would have to be enough to last forever.

"You're sure? You really want to live just for today?" He pulled back slightly, his eyes searching hers, and she answered with a desperate, questing kiss.

They wasted no time moving back into the room, and he stopped embracing her only long enough to close the curtains.

"Oh, Lisa, my darling, my darling . . ." he kept repeating as he slowly pulled back the bed covers, easing her onto the satin sheets.

He kissed her again and again, evidently unable to get enough of her, as his hands explored all the contours and valleys of her quivering body. "Please, please," she pleaded with each outgoing breath.

"I never could refuse you anything," he whispered as he repeated her name in rhythm.

Only vaguely did she note that she didn't know for sure what name to call this man she loved. Then she lost herself totally to the man loving her. There was only him. Until they exploded together in a kaleidoscope of colors.

His hands laced with hers, impressing the golden ring against his own fingers, and he drew his head back ever so slightly to explore her face, determined to engrave it into his memory. "Lisa Rollins, just as you are right now, for always—no makeup, no pretending—you're all the women I could ever want." He melded his lips to her in lingering kiss. "And more women than I could ever have hoped for."

If only she could hold him here in her arms for eternity, Lisa thought. But she must spare him the burden of knowing that she loved him. To leave him free to do whatever he wished with his tomorrows after all the obligations of his yesterdays. Still she wanted to store up and treasure whatever tidbits of his past he could share with her.

Later, after they'd dozed, she began exploring the scars on his body.

"Budapest," he said simply when she touched one on his back.

When she touched another on his leg, he said, "Omaha."

"Omaha?"

"Yeah. I fell off my bike."

"Surely you weren't classified Top Secret as a five-year old," she said softly.

After a moment of devastating silence, he answered, "I almost was. I mentioned before that my father had been in the OSS. Later the CIA. I didn't know that when I was a child, of course. I understood only that we moved a lot and that my father was away on business most of the time. And my mother did a lot of waiting, and always seemed a little sad when he was gone. Until finally she wasn't there to wait anymore." After a pause, he explained, "I was a freshman in college when she died."

His slight shudder of emotion vibrated through Lisa, too, as he continued, "My father didn't last long after that, after he didn't have anyone to come home to anymore." Softly, he said, "That's why I should never be loved as long as I must be a part of the shadow world."

She understood, though she didn't agree. Yet she didn't tell him that it was too late. He already was loved.

Eventually, she dozed in his arms and then awoke with a start to find that she was alone in the bed, although the room was still dark. "Eric," she cried out involuntarily.

"I'm here, darling," he assured her from across the room.

Focusing on his silhouette, she slipped out of bed and padded across the plush carpet. Still half asleep, she wrapped her arms around him and pressed herself against him, surprised to encounter clothing.

"Why are you getting dressed in the middle of the night?" she mumbled.

"I was going to wake you in a few minutes . . ."

He switched on a lamp and in the course of the rapid conversational exchange that followed, Eric insisted that he had to make one last "pilgrimage" without her. "This trip is really dangerous," he said. "I won't risk your safety by letting you come, and there's nothing you can do, an-

yway."

"I'm not leaving you, or letting you leave me. Not until this is over." *Then you can leave me if you want.* The thought wrenched her entire being.

Suddenly he was touching her, caressing her, kissing her all over. With a moan combining pleasure with pleading, she arched her need to his. He guided her back to the bed, building their passion to a fiery crescendo until a brilliant burst of flame propelled them beyond puffy clouds, over rainbows, beyond the smiling moon, to that realm inhabited only by the truest and most passionate of lovers.

They remained locked together for as long as possible.

As they lay there, Eric explained to her that at dawn he was going to spy on a paramilitary training camp operated by a Latin American country in violation of United States laws, although the U.S. government actually knew about it. What the American government wasn't aware of, and what he was about to prove beyond doubt, was that conscripts trained there were being assigned to fight on supposedly opposing sides when they returned home—arbitrarily assigned to fight either for the right-wing dictator or for the so-called Communist insurgents. That tyrant was generating both sides of a civil war to keep U.S. money flowing into his own pockets, and hence into his secret foreign bank accounts.

To Lisa's amazement, Eric didn't argue with her when she insisted again on going with him. Instead, once they were both up and dressed, he enveloped her hand in his as his beloved eyes locked with hers. He said merely, "Sure?"

She gave his fingers a squeeze. "Together."

While the morning sun edged over the horizon, they lay on their stomachs in the underbrush on an area of high ground in

the midst of marshland. Eric was rapidly snapping pictures.

The scene before them looked like any Grade B military training camp, with tanks and assorted armaments visible on the opposite side of a twelve-foot chain link fence, along with scattered groups of soldiers in uniforms Lisa didn't recognize.

"This is it," Eric whispered excitedly. "I've got pictures of some of these same officers wearing uniforms for the other side back in their own country."

Lisa was becoming accustomed to the galloping pulse, the gravelly mouth, the apprehension jaggling through her. The signs of adrenaline-pumping fear had become a commonplace, everyday occurrence for her; she decided, but she changed her mind when the fear ballooned into terror as she got a closer look than she wanted at part of a soldier's uniform. High-laced boots blocked her field of vision.

Rolling over, she looked up and around slowly, gasping when she realized they were encircled by three grim soldiers wearing the unfamiliar uniforms.

"Taking some slides to show the folks back home?" The leader of the trio prodded Eric with his boot. "You and the lady here come with us. The commander will want to chat with you."

Eric rose slowly from his low position. A new sound crunched through the air as his foot connected with the leader's jaw. Lisa watched in amazement as Eric dispatched the remaining two with equal efficiency. Now she understood why kung-fu scenes in movies were shown in slow motion. This was over in a blur.

"We'd better get out of here before reinforcements arrive," Eric said, grabbing her hand and pulling her up and they cut across the marshland, splashing through water.

"I've got all the evidence I need now.

My assignment is over. And we'll make it out of here fine, little partner."

Somehow Lisa managed a smile as she trudged through the marshland. Maybe she was a fool, but she believed him.

The next morning Lisa paced back and forth in a spartan office where she waited for Eric. For once she'd agreed to stay put. Right now he was holding a press conference in a community center nearby.

Eric had determined that giving the full story to network television, radio, and newspapers was the surest protection for himself and Lisa. No U.S. secrets were being revealed; he was exposing an oppressive dictator.

But what if somebody had grabbed him or tried to silence him anyway?

Just when she thought she could endure waiting no longer, the door opened and Eric entered, grinning broadly. "It's all over," he announced.

Including everything between us? Lisa ached to ask. But before she had the chance, another person hurried through the doorway. A beautiful blonde woman.

Eric switched on an even higher-voltage smile for the newcomer, holding out his arms in welcome.

The pert blonde cheerily walked into his open arms as they exchanged delighted greetings. And kept on hugging each other.

Every cell of Lisa's being withered away as she watched Eric and the lady with hair like spun sunshine. Her perfectly shaped coral lips brushed a kiss near Eric's dimple.

Lisa had tried to prepare for parting from Eric. Despite the passion, the tenderness, the rapture that they'd shared, he'd made no promises about the future.

But no amount of expectation or preparation could have left her less than devastated. And to have to watch him in the arms of another woman . . .

After what seemed an eternity, Eric and the blonde separated, but continued to bask in each other's smiles.

"Lis," Eric said, "meet—" He paused as if uncertain whether to reveal the name.

The blonde stepped forward and held out her hand. "It's okay to tell her. Believe me, she's been thoroughly checked out in the last week. Hello, Lisa Rollins. I'm Niera Pascotti."

Lisa accepted her hand absently.

"So," Eric said, "did they send you here to talk me out of something or to talk me into something?"

"Both," Niera admitted candidly. "I guess they thought I'd have some special influence on you even though we're with different agencies. They wanted me to stop the press conference, but my flight from the West Coast was delayed by fog. I must say, you haven't lost your flair. Who else would have the audacity to call a major national press conference in a community center?" Her laugh was like silver bells. "And in August, besides." She pantomimed a fanning motion.

Eric prodded, "So what are you supposed to talk me into?"

"Well," Niera replied with a suppressed smile, "NITA would sort of appreciate it if you'd write them a check for three million dollars."

"Three million dollars!" Lisa exclaimed.

"That was the tightly constructed frame by our Latin American *amigo*," Eric explained to Lisa. "I knew there must be one, but I didn't know the details. He had been depositing money in a bank account in the Cayman Islands in my name for some time to make me look like a traitor."

He casually sat back on top of the desk and crossed his arms in front of him. "The money didn't belong to NITA in the first place, so I don't see why I should give it back. Nobody can withdraw it from the bank in the Caymans except me, so I fig-

ure I can do whatever I want with it."

Niera permitted herself a ladylike chuckle. "It's not as if they want to leave you empty-handed. They particularly want me to talk you into remaining with NITA, so you'll still receive your annual salary, four weeks of paid vacation, and—" she spread her arms in an exaggerated gesture—"retirement benefits."

"I think I've just taken my retirement benefits," he said blithely. "I plan to set up a foundation with most of that three million dollars to aid innocent victims of Latin American wars with food, medical care, education, and clothing." He added with the familiar grin, "I'll leave it headquartered in the Caymans so I'll only have to pay U.S. taxes on the portion I keep for myself. I figure a hundred thousand dollars should be my finder's fee, so to speak. That's less than three percent. And it will be only about fifty thousand dollars after taxes, barely enough to set up an innovative employment agency for Lisa to manage."

So he was thinking of her future. How could her heart both soar and plummet at the same time? He was willing to make up for costing her a job. A buy off to ease his conscience?

Lisa's crestfallen expression wasn't lost on Niera, who moved toward the door, saying "I'm sure you two would like to chat alone. I'm just the first in a long line of personages intent on changing his mind about all this. I'll wait outside, and maybe the others will delay coming in for a while."

She added as an afterthought to Lisa, "By the way, the powers that be wanted me to apologize if the other two agents in Los Angeles came on too strong. They just doing their jobs to the best of their ability, and, uh," she paused, "sometimes Dwight gets a little overly patriotic. He hadn't worked within the States for quite a while."

Lisa heard the click of the office door, but she couldn't pry her gaze from Eric. She took in his lean, muscular shoulders and chest, noting how wonderful he looked in the dignified dark blue suit and tie. She knew she was staring at him; her heart in her eyes, and she tried to gloss over the intensity of her feelings.

"I brought you something," he said reaching into his pocket. "I'm afraid it got a little squashed. Consider it pre-pressed for your scrapbook."

He handed her a rather flattened white lily, and the heady fragrance filled her nostrils. When she reached out to accept it from him he caught her hand in his. "This was the closest I could come to a fleur-de-lis on short notice."

"Thank you," she murmured, trying to control the series of fires igniting her body at his touch. She moistened her lips before finding the fortitude to ask, "Does white mean anything special?"

"I guess you could consider it as symbolizing a blank page. I'm starting completely fresh, anew."

Lisa's hand receded from his, and she cradled the lily in her palm. She would keep it always as a reminder of the spy whom she'd loved. She bit her lip, damming the tears by sheer will. Better to part before she broke down in front of him. "I see. Well, good-bye and good luck," she said crisply.

"What?" Astonishment flashed on his features. "You're giving me the brush-off?"

"You said you wanted a blank page," she stammered out, trying to stifle her emotions. "That wouldn't include me."

"I meant, I'm turning over a new leaf of sorts." He gathered her loosely into his arms while his smile caressed her face. "I wouldn't want to start a blank page without my beginning, my ending, and everything that binds me in between. That's you."

"Oh!"

"I was hoping we could open a different type of employment agency together," he went on, "with your expertise and my contacts. I think there's a market for placing former spies and other law-enforcement specialists."

"Oh," she said again, the word considerably deflated. She pulled away from him. When he'd said he wanted her in his life, he was only making a business proposition.

"I do have another request." He tilted his head, regarding her in amusement. Then he reached into his pocket again and retrieved a gold ring with a tiny jewel.

The Hope Diamond couldn't have daz-

zled Lisa more. She didn't protest as he claimed her left hand, slipped off the fake ring she had been wearing, and replaced it with the new one.

Then he brought her hand to his chest, placing her palm over his heart. The steady beat reverberated through her. "You know you're getting kind of a beat-up specimen. But if you leave me, the biggest scar will be invisible but eternal, here on my heart." His voice caught as he added, "I love you, Lisa."

"I love you, too," she sighed.

"I've never been part of a team like ours before. I think I like it."

"I think I like it, too," she said, snuggling into his arms. ♥



Rainbow's End

When rich, handsome Mike Taylor goes behind her back to get her the loan she desperately needs, Pat Webster, proud widow and mother of two, resolves to see him no more. But love is stronger than pride and Pat learns that help is fine when it stems from love.

CAROLE BUCK

From RAINBOW'S END by Carole Buck. Copyright © 1988 by Carole Buck. Published by permission of The Berkley Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Pat Webster stared down at the health-club membership form she'd been given to fill out and contemplated lying about her weight.

No, she wasn't really contemplating lying. Pat was contemplating *underestimating* her weight by, oh, five—or maybe ten—pounds.

She'd told the truth about her age, hadn't she? It was right there on the form in blue ink. Age: 32.

She'd been scrupulously accurate about

her five-feet-five-and-one-half-inch height, too.

Why, she'd even come within a believable margin of error when she'd listed her measurements!

Worrying her lower lip with her teeth, Pat looked up from the form and glanced around at the reception area where she was sitting. *You're going to have to do more than lie about your weight to fit in around here*, she thought wryly.

Why, oh, why, she asked herself,

couldn't she have won a year's membership at one of the local YWCAs instead of the most recently opened branch of the nationally known P.T. Unlimited health-club chain? Patrice Webster, financially-strapped widow and mother of two, simply did not belong in this elegantly spartan, screamingly expensive facility, which catered to the most elite members of Atlanta's "sweat set."

Oh well! You are who you are, she told herself smiling. You're not perfect, but you're pretty much your own woman these days—and that's something to be proud of.

No. Considering the state she'd been in less than four years ago, that was a lot to be proud of.

The number Pat wrote in the blank next to the word *Weight* was the number she'd read on her scale that morning.

Peyton Michael—"Mike"—Taylor spotted her as he came out of the door to the health club's business office next to the reception desk. She was impossible to miss.

Who was she? he wondered. He pegged her age at about thirty. She was definitely younger than his own thirty-six. But she wasn't a girl, which was just fine with him. He'd outgrown girls a long time ago.

She—whoever she was—was glancing over toward the juice bar and its gathering of P.T. Unlimited Saturday-morning regulars. Mike was too far away to see the color of her eyes, but he had a feeling that they were brown like her hair. He watched as a funny little smile curled the corners of her generous mouth, then saw her expression take on a feisty firmness.

Stubborn, he decided instantly. Sassy, too.

And she was as appealing as all get-out. Unforced. Natural. No artificial additives or preservatives.

She gave off an aura of very womanly

warmth. Mike could feel the unmistakable tug of its attraction clear across the reception area. It wasn't an entirely sexual thing; although, God knew, he was conscious of more than a few physical stirrings as he looked at her. But beyond that, there was a . . . sparking of recognition. A strange and inexplicable realization of rightness.

"Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Taylor?"

This eager-beaver inquiry came from the blond-haired, blue-eyed hunk standing behind the reception desk. The query hit Mike like a cold, wet towel across the face, jerking him out of his reverie. He turned. "Ah—no. No, thanks, Jeff. I'm fine," he responded.

Mike darted a quick look at the brown-haired woman. "Look Jeff, do you see the pretty brunette over there? The one with the short hair, wearing the white top. Do you know who she is?"

Jeff seemed slightly surprised by the question. "Oh, sure." He nodded. "That's the raffle lady."

"The . . . raffle lady?"

"Yeah, the raffle lady," Jeff confirmed. "You know—it was one of those charity things. A dollar a chance, and the money goes to a good cause. A bunch of local businesses donated prizes. Doug gave a year's deluxe membership here, and that lady won it."

"I see," Mike replied. "Do you know what her name is?"

"Sure thing. It's Patricia—no, *Patrice* Webster. And she's going to be kind of a problem today. I scheduled Vickie to take her around. Only Vickie isn't coming in, because she's sick. I guess I'm going to have to get one of the guys to show her—"

"I'll do it," Mike interrupted abruptly.

Jeff's eyes widened. "But, Mr. Taylor! You're the *owner*—"

"Which means I should know my way around here pretty well, hmm?" Mike felt

an odd sense of anticipation ripple through him.

"Uh—uh—yeah, I guess," Jeff agreed uncertainly. "It's just that—uh—"

Mike smiled. "Don't worry, Jeff. I'll take care of Patrice Webster. I promise."

Pat felt the man's presence a split second before he said her name, and this awareness sent an odd tingle scurrying up her spine.

"Mrs. Webster?"

"Yes?" she responded, looking up into a pair of disconcertingly direct gray-green eyes.

The man who'd spoken appeared to be in his mid-thirties—there were lines of age and experience at the corners of his eyes and mouth and an aura of tempered maturity in his stance. He stood a shade over six feet tall and had the lean, pared-down physique of an endurance athlete who had remorselessly sweated off every ounce of superfluous fat.

He was emphatically *not* a "gym dandy." Indeed, his workout wardrobe had definitely seen better days. Whoever he was, what could he want with her?

"Ms. Webster, I'm Mike Taylor," Mike said. "I'm going to give you your orientation tour." He smiled and extended his hand.

Pat rose to her feet and took his hand. She wished she hadn't. The firm clasp of his fingers around hers was like the closing of an electrical circuit. His touch sent a jolt of excitement arrowing up her arm—from wrist, to elbow, to shoulder—then streaking clear down to her toes.

I don't believe this, Pat thought.

I don't believe this, Mike thought.

The contact lasted no more than five seconds. Pat was never certain which one of them broke it. The silence that followed seemed to go on for a long, long time.

"You . . . can . . . call me Pat," she said at last.

Mike realized he intended to call her a lot of things, but calling her Pat—at her invitation—was a good place to start.

"Any time you're ready, then, Pat." Mike could sense her confusion and see the flush of fresh color that had risen in the cheeks of her oval face. *Hey*, he wanted to say, *whatever this is, it's happening to me, too.*

"Well, actually, the person at the reception desk said something about one of the—ah—*girls* taking me around."

"There's a little scheduling problem with the girls," Mike replied easily. "I'm afraid you're going to have to make do with one of the boys. Me."

"Oh," Pat responded, then found herself trying to repress a crazy bubble of laughter at the absurdity of anyone classifying Mike Taylor as a boy. He was a man—a one-hundred-percent mature male.

All right, then. Mike Taylor was a man. And she was a woman. *That* was what this was all about. Wasn't it? She'd been living like a nun since her husband, Jack, had been killed by a drunk driver three-and-a-half years ago. Celibacy had been partly a matter of choice and partly a matter of being so physically and emotionally exhausted by the struggle to bail herself and her two sons out of the mess Jack had left them in that she hadn't had the energy or the inclination to pursue *any* kind of a social life.

"Pat?" Mike asked, trying to sort out the rapidly changing emotions he saw flowing across her face. "Do you have a problem with my showing you around?" He wasn't sure what he was going to do if she responded in the affirmative.

Pat blinked. *Tell the truth*, she admonished herself. *Mike Taylor's reminded you that you're a woman. That's nothing to be scared about. It's something to celebrate! It's something to enjoy. So, let Mike Taylor go on reminding you that there's*

more to your life than being Jack Webster's nearly bankrupt widow and Scott and Luke Webster's terminally overworked mother. Let him go on . . . at least for a little while. Tell the truth.

Her brown eyes lifted to meet his gray-green ones. "No, I don't have a problem," she said simply. "I'd like you to show me around, Mike."

"Good." He hid the sudden surge of relief this answer triggered by giving her an off-center smile. Pat smiled back, mentally revising her previous estimate of him up to one-hundred-and-ten-percent mature male.

A minute or so later, Pat adjourned to the ladies' locker room to change into her workout clothes. She walked in on two magnolia-skinned Southern belles who were refreshing their flawless makeup jobs while getting down and dirty with a little "girl" talk.

"Jolene, did you happen to notice who's here this morning?"

"Yes, I happened to notice. Along with every other female in this place. You know, it positively astounds me that a man like that is walkin' around without a wife."

"Well, good Lord, Jolene. He's spent half his life trainin' to win that Olympic marathon, and the other half makin' millions of dollars. He hasn't had time to get married."

"Hmmm, maybe now that he's won that li'l old marathon and made all those millions, he just *might* have time to take a bride."

"Sugar, I know what you're thinkin' in that devious brain of yours, and I've only got three words to say to you."

"Yes, Maryanne?"

"Get in line!"

Pat was still shaking her head in amused disbelief when she left the ladies'

locker room a few moments later. She found Mike lounging casually against the wall, waiting for her. She speculated, for a second or two, about his status at this P.T. Unlimited club. Although he'd referred to himself as "one of the boys," she couldn't quite slot him in the same employment category as Jeff the desk attendant.

"What's so funny?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, it's nothing, really," Pat said with a little shrug, letting him usher her slightly ahead of him. "But . . . if you happen to know a club member who's a millionaire and an Olympic marathoner, you might warn him that he's rated a prime target by several local husband hunters."

Damn! Mike swore silently. There was no need for him to warn the man Pat was talking about. She'd just done it. At age twenty-eight, he, Peyton Michael Taylor, had won an Olympic gold medal for crossing the finish line first after a grueling twenty-six mile race. And, in the eight years since that victory, he'd successfully transformed himself from athlete to entrepreneur.

How in heaven was he supposed to respond to what she'd just said? He hadn't intended to deceive Pat about his identity. Actually, he'd assumed—arrogantly, perhaps—that she'd recognize his name when he introduced himself. But she hadn't and there had been something very special about having a woman look at him and see Mike Taylor the *man*, not Mike Taylor the champion or the checkbook.

So, what the hell could he say to her now? How about: *Oh, Pat, I know I made it sound like I just work here but, actually, I own the place. Or, maybe: Well, gee, Pat, that millionaire marathoner you just mentioned is me.*

Right. Sure. Somehow, he didn't think she'd react very well to either of those revelations.

"Mike?" Pat glanced over her shoulder at him.

His eyes locked with hers, and Mike made up his mind to let the situation ride, at least for a little while.

"I think I know who you're talking about," he said wryly. "I'll make sure he watches out for himself."

The tour of the P. T. Unlimited facility proved to be very impressive. That Mike knew his stuff, and was highly regarded by both club staffers and members, quickly became obvious. Pat discovered he had a knack for anticipating what she wanted to know even before she realized she wanted to know it. She also discovered that he was extremely good at prying personal information out of her while providing almost none about himself.

"—so, actually, this P. T. Unlimited membership is the first thing I've ever won," she told him in response to a comment he'd made about her being a raffle winner. "My kids talked me into entering."

"Your kids?" Mike questioned, trying to keep his tone casual. The admission that she had children hit him like a punch in the gut. Did these children have a father? Was there a husband?

Pat nodded "I've got two sons. Scott's eleven and Luke's eight. To tell the truth, they badgered me into buying a chance in the raffle because first prize was some kind of Italian sports car. And second prize was a trip to Disney World."

"Mmm. I take it your sons weren't completely thrilled with what you won, then."

"I think it's safe to say that," Pat replied with a laugh, fluffing her short brown hair. Both boys had been bitterly disappointed by the results of the raffle. However, Scott, her budding track and field star, had eventually conceded that a deluxe membership at P. T. Unlimited was "heavy duty."

"You're—ah—husband didn't want the

membership?" Mike asked.

Pat came to a halt and looked up at him. It was not a very subtle question, and she could see by the look in Mike's eyes that he was conscious of this. But instead of feeling offended, she felt strangely flattered. "My husband is dead," she said after a moment. "I'm a widow."

"I'm . . . sorry." Mike felt ashamed of himself.

"Thank you." Pat was sorry Jack Webster was dead, too, although she knew that, had he not been killed, she probably would have ended up divorcing him.

She'd depended on her husband to take care of her and their children. He hadn't. The day after his funeral, when the enormity of the situation she faced began to sink in, Pat had vowed that she would never again allow herself to be dependent on anyone else. *She* would take care of herself, and her sons.

So far, she'd kept her vow. And she was going to keep on doing the same.

They'd started walking again, moving toward the club's main workout area. Glancing at Pat's profile, Mike glimpsed a fierce, familiar kind of determination. It was familiar because he'd seen that kind of determination many, many times when he'd looked at his reflection in the mirror.

"I noticed that you said on your membership form that you're a runner," he remarked, breaking the silence.

Pat was grateful for the change of subject. "I said I *run*," she corrected with a whimsical look. "I'm not going to consider myself a runner until July fourth?"

"What happens on July fourth?"

Pat hesitated for a second or so. "Well," she said slowly, "on July fourth, I am going to run in the Peachtree Road Race. And I'm going to finish it, too. All ten kilometers."

"Peachtree can be a tough race," Mike commented.

Although his tone was offhand, Pat was

sure that he was speaking from experience. "You've run in the Peachtree, haven't you?" she asked, genuinely interested.

Something odd flickered through Mike's eyes. "Yeah," he responded. "I've run the Peachtree."

The look on his face made Pat a bit uncomfortable. "You . . . you didn't win it by any chance, did you?" she inquired a little awkwardly.

Mike's mouth eased into a crooked grin. "No, I didn't win it," he said with rueful honesty. Peachtree had been the last race in which he had competed. It had not turned out to be a particularly glorious conclusion to his athletic career.

"Oh," Pat responded, uncertain of what to say next. "Well, I certainly don't have any delusions about winning. All I want to do is *finish*."

They'd come to a halt beside a gleaming row of exercise machines. Almost without thinking, Mike caught Pat by the upper arm and turned her to face him.

"It sounds like it means a lot to you," he observed with quiet intensity, his eyes gazing unwaveringly down into hers. He had no rational explanation for why this woman, out of all the women he'd ever seen, met, or made love to, was capable of reaching him in such a unique and irresistible way. He only knew that she'd gotten to him, completely, compellingly.

Pat stared up at him. She could feel the potent warmth of his hand through the material of her leotard and T-shirt. "It—it does mean a lot to me," she answered. "It didn't start out that way. I mean, I started running because of this New Year's resolution I made. You know. The one everybody makes about losing weight and getting more exercise. But after a month, I began to get . . . hooked."

It was very hard for Patrice to put into words, but when she was running, she wasn't Jack Webster's widow or Scott and

Luke Webster's mom; she was Patrice Nicole Webster—individual, independent woman. "And then, in April, I happened to see an entry for the Peachtree Road Race. I decided to enter. Since then . . . well, maybe this will sound silly to you, Mike, but running in the race—*finishing* the race—has turned into a way of proving myself to myself."

Mike skimmed his hand along the line of her upper arm, then dropped it.

"I don't think that sounds silly at all, Pat," he told her with absolute honesty. "In fact—you've got two months till the race. Let's talk about a *serious* training program."

"I—I don't have a lot of spare time."

"So, we'll make the time you *do* have count. Don't worry, Pat. I'll take good care of you."

A part of her recoiled instinctively at his last sentence. She wanted to do this on her own. This was something for *her*.

"Pat?" Mike asked.

Pat took a deep breath, forcing herself to relax her involuntarily tightened muscles. For heaven's sake! she chided herself. Mike was merely offering to give her some *help*. He wasn't going to take control of what she did.

She tilted her chin, seeing the concern in Mike's lean face. It surprised her a little.

"Do you do this for every new member, Mr. Taylor?" she asked, striving for and just about managing a teasingly challenging tone.

His grin, when it came, was full of undisguised relief. "No, Ms. Webster," he answered with devastating simplicity. "I most certainly do not."

"I can't *believe* it," Scott Webster moaned for the dozenth time in less than fifteen minutes. "I can't believe my mother actually met Peyton Michael Taylor and didn't even know it!"

"Well, believe it, young man," Pat replied. "Because that's exactly what happened." The words came out more sharply than she'd intended, and she took a deep breath, reminding herself that it was not her older son with whom she was angry.

No, indeed. The target of her anger was none other than the tawny-haired, hazel-eyed Mr. Peyton Michael Taylor himself. "One of the boys" Mike Taylor, hah! Mike Taylor the multimillionaire marathoner was more like it. She was so mad at the man she wanted to spit sweat socks. He'd made an absolute and utter fool out of her.

She'd come out of her orientation session at P.T. Unlimited a little sore, but filled with a deep sense of accomplishment. Mike had been the epitome of athletic expertise and encouragement . . . or so she'd thought.

Damn. He'd probably been laughing to himself the whole time.

After leaving the club, Pat had picked up Luke, who'd been on a sleepover at his best friend's house. She'd then gone home and proceeded to whip up four pecan pies for Simply Delicious, the local catering firm that employed her as a free-lance dessert chef. Scott had turned up shortly after the pies had been picked up for delivery.

The subject of how Mom had spent her day hadn't arisen until midway through Saturday night's usual spaghetti-and-meatball supper. Pat had only gotten about forty-five seconds into her account when Scott had started gasping. He had swiftly filled his mother in on all the details Mike Taylor had neglected to mention.

"Mom? You didn't *really* ask him if he ever ran the Peachtree Road Race, did you?" Scott inquired hopefully.

Pat put down her fork. "I'm afraid I did," she affirmed. "Do you want to tell me what's so dreadful about that?"

"Well, the Peachtree was the last race Peyton Michael Taylor ever ran."

"He quit racing because he lost the

Peachtree?"

"Oh, geez, Mom!" Scott looked appalled at her ignorance. "No! He quit because he got hurt."

"Hurt?" Pat repeated, her gently arched brows drawing together. She hadn't noticed any signs of debilitating injuries when she'd observed Mike Taylor today!

"Yeah," Scott said, nodding vehemently. "It was six years ago. See, he's got this back problem. Well, somebody tripped him near the start of the race. But he got up. Only he was really hurting, you know. Still, he tried to run *through* the pain. Just like a champion. He pushed himself. Except, finally, he had to stop running because he was nearly passing out."

Pat digested this information, tapping her fingertips on the table. "Scott, just how are you so familiar with this?" she asked curiously. "It happened when you were only five years old."

Scott looked surprised. "Peyton Michael Taylor's a *hero*, Mom. See, he actually started out as this real sickly wimp, can you believe it? Then he took up running. And Coach says he was so determined, he ran and ran until he wasn't sickly anymore. He kept at it, and in the end he won the Olympic marathon."

"I . . . see," Pat said slowly.

"He must be kind of tough, huh?" Luke observed with a tinge of admiration. He'd apparently been impressed by the wimp-to-champ transformation.

"Yeah, Luke." Scott nodded. "He's kind of tough." He paused, scratching his nose and giving his mother a speculative look. "Um . . . Mom?"

"Yes?" Pat had a feeling she knew what was coming.

"Do you think you're going to see him again?"

"I don't know, Scott." Part of her wanted to avoid Mike Taylor because of the trick he'd played. Part of her wanted to find him and give him a piece of her mind

about what he'd done. And yet *another* part of her . . .

All right. She'd *liked* him. But she'd liked him as Mike Taylor, health-club trainer. She wasn't at all sure how she felt about him as Peyton Michael Taylor, Olympic athlete and entrepreneur.

"Well, um, if you *do* see him again, do you think you could get his autograph for me?"

As things turned out, Scott got Peyton Michael Taylor's autograph for himself the following afternoon.

Pat was just finishing washing up a stack of mixing bowls when the front doorbell rang. She heard the clomping of Scott's footsteps as he went to answer it. Then . . .

Nothing.

A minute went by. Two minutes. Nearly three.

"Scott?" she called, reaching for a dish towel. "Scott, who—"

The door to the kitchen swung open to admit her son. He was wearing a dazed smile. The reason for that smile was three steps behind him.

Peyton Michael Taylor. All six-feet-plus of him. The virile force of his masculine presence filled Pat's cluttered, modest-sized kitchen.

"It's Mr. Taylor, Mom," Scott announced in a nearly reverential tone.

"Yes, I can see that, Scott," Pat replied evenly. What in heaven's name was he doing here? "Good afternoon, Mr. Taylor," she said.

Mike's eyes narrowed. She knew. He'd figured it was a virtual certainty that she did, given the way her son had greeted him at the door. She obviously wasn't very happy about what she knew.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Webster," he responded courteously.

"He's here to go *running* with you, Mom," Scott said, his tone progressing

from near-reverential to unabashedly awed.

"W-what?" Pat asked, her voice cracking slightly.

"I happened to be in the neighborhood," Mike told her "And I thought we could do a couple of miles together."

"You *happened* to be in the neighborhood," Pat repeated with an edge. "You know, *Mike*, I'll just bet if the people who ran the raffle had realized that the deluxe membership in P. T. Unlimited included house calls by its owner, the *millionaire marathoner*, they would have made it *first* prize instead of *fourth*!"

"Pat—" Mike took a step forward.

"Mom?" Scott was staring at her as though she'd gone completely crazy.

Pat bit her lower lip as she realized she was upsetting and possibly embarrassing her son.

"Scott—" she began.

"Scott, would you mind giving your mother and me a couple of minutes to talk—alone?" Mike cut in smoothly. He had to do something and do it quickly.

Pat experienced a jab of resentment at Mike's interruption and another at Scott's snap-to response.

"Oh—oh, sure, Mr. Taylor. I don't mind at all. And, hey, thanks for the autograph!" With that, Scott made his exit from the kitchen.

"Why did you trick me?" Pat instantly attacked.

"I didn't trick you, Pat. Not intentionally."

"Oh, really? You pretended to be a staff member."

"It wasn't a matter of pretending. You assumed—"

"Because you let me!"

"Look, you have a right to be upset—"

"Oh, thank you very much."

"*Pat.* Hey, I introduced myself to you as Mike Taylor just the way I'd introduce myself to anyone else. And, frankly, as

egomaniacal as it may sound, I figured you'd know who I was—am."

"And when you realized you'd figured wrong?"

He cocked his head, trying to divine what she was thinking. "And when I realized I'd figured wrong, I didn't know what to say," he answered simply. "I mean, how would you have reacted if I'd walked over to you and said: 'Hello, I'm Peyton Michael Taylor, I own this place and about two dozen others like it, I have my own line of athletic equipment, and, oh, yes, I won the Olympic marathon a few years back.'"

Pat conceded that he had a point. "I probably wouldn't have reacted very well," she admitted. "When you put it like that, it sounds . . ." She shrugged. "But I still don't understand why you even came over in the first place. Was it because I won the raffle?"

Mike had to laugh. "No, it wasn't because you won the raffle, Pat. I spotted you when I came out of the club's business office. I asked Jeff at the desk who you were, and he told me. Then he started talking about having a problem with your orientation tour. What can I tell you? I saw an opportunity and took it."

"An opportunity for what?" She didn't quite understand why he laughed.

Mike hesitated a moment, recognizing that there was an unexpected but very genuine innocence at the heart of this question.

"An opportunity to pick you up, of course," he replied levelly, then gave her one of his crooked smiles.

Pat's brown eyes widened and she felt her heart flip-flop in her breast.

"That—that's crazy, Mike," she said.

"Maybe," he agreed. "But it's also true."

"Well, just what did you intend on doing after you picked me up?" There was a flinty edge to her voice.

"That," he confessed, "I'm still working on."

"Oh."

His eyes met hers, and there was a pause. Finally, Pat looked away. A moment later, Mike spoke. "Are we . . . all right about yesterday?" he asked. "I apologize, sincerely, if I embarrassed or upset you. That was the furthest thing from my mind. Please, believe me."

After a few seconds, Pat brought her gaze back to his. "I believe you," she said. "I—I probably over-reacted to the situation."

"So how about going running with me?"

"I—" She wanted to. She genuinely did want to. "I really can't leave Scott—"

The door to the kitchen swung open and her older son materialized. "That's okay, Mom!" he assured her. "Go run with Mr. Taylor. It'll be great."

Pat stared at Scott, appalled. "Were you listening?" she demanded.

"No!" he denied outraged. "I was going to the bathroom when I heard my name, and my ears kind of scoped in on it, that's all."

"Scott—" Pat persisted.

"Oh come on, Mom! I'm in sixth grade. I'm old enough to stay here by myself and take care of Luke, too, for a while."

Pat glanced at Mike and noted the glint of amusement in his eyes. "I've barely started dinner."

"Mom!" Scott groaned and rolled his eyes. "You can make dinner after you run, for Pete's sake. Me and Luke will help. We can eat later than usual. And Mr. Taylor can stay and eat with us." He gazed imploringly at Mike. "What do you think, Mr. Taylor?"

Mike lost his battle not to smile. "It sounds fine to me, Scott," he responded, very man-to-man. "But it's really up to your mother."

Pat gave an exasperated sigh. "I'll go

change."

Their run along the streets of the modest neighborhood where Pat and the boys lived was a slow but steady one. The May weather was pleasantly balmy. Pat was enjoying herself.

"I . . . suppose . . ." she said, glancing to her right to look at Mike. "I suppose this is a snail's pace for you."

He looked at her and smiled. "Compared to the way I ran when I started, we're flying," he returned.

"Scott said you were sickly when you were a boy. When you . . . started running."

Mike's mouth twisted. "Oh, yeah," he confirmed.

"So you ran to get healthy?"

Mike sucked in a deep breath and expelled it. He wasn't given to sharing his reasons for running, but he wanted to share them with Pat. He wanted her to understand where he'd come from . . . and where he'd gotten to. "To tell the truth," he said, "I ran to get back at my father."

"What?" Pat questioned, taken aback by the starkness of his response.

"My father put in twenty years in the air force," he said. "He retired as a colonel. Then he founded an air-freight company. I was an only child, and I was an extreme disappointment to him."

"Because you weren't very healthy?"

"In part. You see, there was a time when I was the kind of kid who could have gotten beaten up by a ninety-pound weakling. And that just didn't fit Colonel Michael Taylor's standard for his only son and heir." He let a few yards go by. "There was a constant stream of criticism. Nothing I did was good enough for him. I grew up feeling that he was ashamed to have me for a son."

"Oh, Mike." They'd both slowed, shifting from running to walking. Pat felt a rush of sympathy for the boy Mike Tay-

lor had once been.

Mike shook his head just a little. He didn't want any pity. He'd made his peace with the past and he'd come out the better for it. He wanted Pat to know that.

"I realize now that he was trying to motivate me. And, in the end, he accomplished what he was trying to do. I started running just to prove to him that I wasn't some scrawny wimp. There wasn't a race I ran that I didn't go into thinking, *I'll show you, Dad.*"

"Did you get into business for the same reason?"

"That's right," he confirmed. He came to a complete halt.

Pat stopped, too, and regarded Mike with thoughtful brown eyes. "What about now, Mike?" she inquired softly.

"My father and I had a reconciliation. It didn't happen right away. I took some lumps and so did he. But we ended up . . . respecting each other." He paused for a moment, then reached out and trailed the tips of his fingers down Pat's cheek. "Do you remember what you said yesterday about how running the Peachtree Road Race has become a way of proving yourself to yourself?"

Pat nodded. His touch released fluid streamers of pleasure within her. "I said that I was afraid it might sound silly to you."

"And I told you it didn't. I told you that because what you feel about that race, I feel about the rest of my life."

Pat watched Mike through new eyes during the hours that followed. What she saw was a man who was open to life, to the possibilities and the people around him, in a very special way.

Sunday dinner—chicken, mashed potatoes, peas, and her experimental brownie cream pie—was an interesting and enlightening experience. Long before dessert was served, Mike had received re-

peated invitations from both boys to come by and visit them any time he wished.

Pat walked Mike to the front door of her small, rented house shortly after eight that evening. Luke had been dispatched to take a bath, and Scott was supposed to be finishing up some homework in his bedroom.

"I'm glad you came, Mike," Pat said, tilting her chin to look up at him.

"So am I," he responded.

"I hope you didn't mind Scott and Luke too much," she said.

"I didn't mind them at all. They're terrific boys, Pat. You should be proud."

"I am." She laughed a little. "If course, their manners were unusually good tonight."

"The novelty of having a guest, no doubt. I suppose once that wears off, they'll revert to—ah—normal?"

Something inside Pat went very still. She didn't want to read any implications, any future possibilities, into his question. Yes, Mike Taylor had slipped into their lives very comfortably this evening. But he could slip out again in an instant. She couldn't—she *wouldn't*—allow herself even to think about the idea that he might be around long enough for the "novelty" of his presence to wear off.

"If you consider constant name-calling 'normal,' you're probably right," she said lightly.

Mike controlled a frown. It bothered him that she'd turned away his question so casually. He hadn't meant it casually.

Take it slow and easy, he counseled himself. You've known this woman less than two days. This was not some kind of dash for the finish line. This was about going the distance.

"I'm afraid I don't know a lot about what's normal for kids and what isn't," he admitted.

"I don't think anyone does," Pat responded.

"So . . ." Mike began after a few seconds of silence. He was conscious of a thickening heat in his blood, a tension in his body. "Will you run with me again?"

It seemed to Pat that the green in his eyes had suddenly gotten much brighter. "All right," she agreed.

"Terrific." He moved closer to her. "And will you have dinner with me—say tomorrow night?"

"I . . . I'm not sure."

"Will you think about it?"

"Yes."

"Good." His voice had gotten lower and lazier with each successive question, taking on an almost hypnotic quality. "Now, will you close your eyes so I can kiss you?"

"Mi—"

Pat's lips had begun to part to speak his name when Mike covered them with his own.

The brush of his mouth back and forth over hers was very light, yet every sensation it stirred within her seemed to linger, echoing through her body with sweetly escalating sensuality.

It was a kiss of promises and possibilities . . . not unbridled passion. There was electricity, to be sure, but it was exquisitely, erotically restrained.

Pat made a sound that held both surprise and surrender. She felt him slip his left arm around her waist and gather her close, and shifted instinctively. The fit of their bodies matched hard to soft, male to female.

And then, it was over. Over . . . but far from finished.

Pat stared at Mike, her cheeks flushed, her brown eyes huge and liquid.

Mike stared at Pat, his tanned skin pulled taut over the bones of his face, his eyes brilliant.

"Mike?" she whispered.

"I think I'd better go, Pat," he said, his voice thick and not quite steady. "But I'm

definitely coming back.”

“I don’t believe this,” Pat said late one afternoon about two weeks later. She stared at the petite middle-aged woman standing on the other side of her office desk. “You honestly want *me* to manage the Simply Delicious Shop?”

Elyse Holcomb nodded. “Don’t act so surprised, Pat,” she responded. “You know perfectly well that that’s been part of my plan ever since I started thinking about expanding the catering business and opening a permanent shop.”

Pat didn’t know quite what to say. Elyse Holcomb, whose husband, Professor Nathaniel Holcomb, had hired her as his secretary right after Jack’s death, had grown to be Pat’s best friend and supporter in these last three years. Early on, Elyse had discovered Pat’s culinary talents, and had swiftly recruited her as a freelance member of her Simply Delicious catering firm.

Pat frankly admired the older woman’s drive and energy. She also felt in her debt in more ways than she could hope to repay.

“Elyse, are you sure—” she began.

“Yes!” Elyse interrupted emphatically. “Of course, I realize Nate will probably divorce me if I lure you away from here. You do a remarkable job. But *that’s* why I want to hire you full time.”

“Elyse—” Pat was flattered. She truly was. She was also decidedly unsettled by what the older woman was proposing. “Elyse, I don’t have any *experience*.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Elyse insisted. “You’ve got an instinct for this kind of business, Pat. You’re terrific with people, and you’re a marvelous cook. *You’re perfect!* In fact, though I realize that your financial situation is still very tight, I want to give you a chance to invest in the shop.”

Pat stared at Elyse, not quite believing what she’d just heard. “Invest—as in money? As in being your partner?”

“A minor partner,” Elyse elaborated. “But it would be a stake in the business. You’d be working for *yourself*—not just for me.”

Pat was glad she was sitting down. She might have fallen over if she’d been standing. The proposal Elyse was dangling in front of her was as tantalizing as it was terrifying. “How—how much money are we talking about, Elyse?” she asked after nearly a full minute of silence.

Elyse cited a figure. In the world of high finance, such a figure would have been snickered at. In Pat’s world, it was a fortune.

“Oh,” was all she could think of to say.

“What about a bank loan?” Elyse suggested cautiously.

“It would take a miracle for me to get one. I told you what happened when I went in about a car loan. Because I was stupid enough to cosign all those papers for Jack, my credit rating is awful.”

“I could cosign,” Elyse offered.

“No,” Pat refused immediately and unshakably. “Thank you, but no, Elyse.”

“Giving you a loan wouldn’t be a risk, no matter *what* your credit rating says,” Elyse insisted. “When I think of how hard you’ve worked these past three-and-a-half years, how far you’ve come . . .”

“I’ve still got a long way to go,” Pat responded with quiet determination. She *did* have a long way to go, but go it she would—independently.

“Well,” Elyse laughed, “I—ah—don’t suppose you have a rich friend?”

Elyse meant this as a joke and Pat knew it, but that didn’t stop her from stiffening. The image of a lean, tawny-haired man with arresting gray-green eyes filled her brain. *No*, she told herself fiercely, appalled that she could even think of such a thing. *No—never!*

“I don’t have a rich friend, Elyse,” she said tautly. “And even if I did, I wouldn’t ask him for money. I wouldn’t ask him for

anything."

"'Him'?" Elyse picked up pointedly, staring at Pat.

Pat looked at her. "Please. Don't push it, all right?"

Amazingly, Elyse didn't.

Pat wasn't in the best of moods that evening, as she was trying to prepare yet another economical tuna casserole meal for her and the children.

She wanted so much to invest in Elyse's shop, but was afraid no loan would come her way. On top of it, Scott had asked for a new pair of track shoes which was out of the question at the moment, and Luke had openly demanded to know, in the middle of the supermarket, if they were poor, and that was why they never had anything good to eat.

Mike didn't realize what he was walking into when he showed up at Pat's house about forty minutes later bearing a grocery bag containing four of the finest steaks in Atlanta, salad fixings from the Farmers' Market, two pints of Haagen-Dazs ice cream, and a very good bottle of red wine. The boys welcomed him at the door. They were wildly enthusiastic about the steaks, and swiftly volunteered to unearth the Webster family grill from its storage spot in the garage. With that small detail settled, Mike went cheerfully into the house to surprise Pat.

"Mike!" Pat exclaimed, brushing a curl of brown hair off her forehead. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi, Pat," he returned. She looked frazzled and slightly fed up, he thought with a flash of concern. He set the brown paper sack of groceries down on the nearest counter. "I'm here to save you from tuna-noodle casserole," he announced smiling.

"What's wrong with tuna-noodle casserole?" Pat inquired with an edge.

"Ah—nothing," he assured her, his smile fading at her tone.

Pat glanced at the bulging bag on the counter. She didn't even want to think about what it so obviously contained. "So?"

"So—what do you say about replacing tuna with steak?"

Pat caught her breath. What was going on today? A conspiracy to rub her nose in the unpleasant consequences of her straitened circumstances? She'd had it up to *there* after her conversations with Elyse, Scott, and Luke. She was tired, her head hurt, and to start on the same subject with *Mike*, a man who'd obviously never had a money problem in his life . . .

"What I'd say is no," she responded baldly.

Mike blinked. "Excuse me?" he asked, confused by her very uncharacteristic behavior.

"*I don't need your charity, Mike!*" Pat burst out, her voice as brittle as glass.

For a moment, Mike was too stunned to speak. He knew Patrice Webster was a proud woman. That was one of the many things he'd come to admire about her during the past two weeks, as his initial interest in her had deepened into something far more complex than simple physical attraction. But could her pride possibly extend to this?

Mike took a deep breath and expelled it sharply through his nose. "My bringing you this bag of groceries is not—*not*—charity," he told her, his eyes flashing emerald. "In case you've forgotten, I've sponged three—no, *four*—free meals off you since we met. I thought it might be nice if I reciprocated for a change."

It was true. In the past two weeks, Mike had gotten into the habit of driving Pat home after her training at the club, and had often accepted invitations from her and the boys to stay for dinner. But that was something else, Pat told herself stern-

ly.

"You took me to dinner last week," she reminded him. They'd had an absolutely wonderful time, too.

"Dammit, that was a *date*!" he declared furiously. "I took you to dinner because I wanted to be with you, not because I felt I *owed* you something!"

Pat was miserably aware that she was overreacting, yet she couldn't seem to stop herself.

"Pat, *why* are you making such a big deal out of this?" Mike demanded.

"Because I know how much steak costs" she threw at him.

This comment struck Mike as such a ludicrous non sequitur that he started to respond to it without really thinking. "Look," he said with asperity, "I think I can afford the price of a couple of ste—oh," he broke off abruptly, suddenly understanding. "Oh, hell," he swore, appalled.

Pat turned away, her face pale. "I'm glad *you* can afford steak, Mike," she said in a muffled voice. "Because *I* can't."

"Pat—" Mike began, his voice raw, then stopped, knowing words weren't going to be enough. Galvanized by instinct, he crossed to where Pat was standing. Taking her by the shoulders, he turned her around. The rigidity of her posture and the angry, humiliated hurt in her overbright eyes made him feel bitterly ashamed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry. . . . I'm sorry." He gathered her against him, silently cursing himself for his insensitivity and stupidity. "I didn't think," he admitted, "and I should have."

For a few seconds, Pat remained stiff and unresponsive in his embrace. Then, as the anguished regret in his voice penetrated her own turbulent emotions, she made a shuddery little sound and started to yield. "Oh, M—Mike . . ." she said unsteadily. "*I'm* the one who's sorry." She choked back a sob, pressing her head

against his chest. As upset as she was, she was conscious of how good it felt to be held by him . . . to be comforted by him.

God, she'd been so painfully, profoundly alone since Jack's death. The desperate need to be strong—for her own sake as much as for her sons—had made her keep people at arm's length. And now, suddenly, the desire to let down her guard, to let herself lean on someone, was almost irresistible.

Almost . . . but not quite.

The front door opened and slammed shut. Pat and Mike broke apart. A moment later, Scott and Luke bounded into the kitchen.

"The grill's out of the garage, Mike," Scott exclaimed proudly. "The inside was sort of slimy, but I cleaned it with some newspapers."

"It was *gross*," Luke elaborated with an eloquent face. "But while Scott did that, I found a bag of charcoal!"

Mike's supplicating gaze met Pat's startled one, communicating a heartfelt message of apology.

Several seconds passed. Then, slowly, Pat summoned up a smile. "It—it sounds like you two have got things under control," she complimented her sons. "So . . . tell me. Do you want baked potatoes or french fries with your steaks?"

Dinner turned out to be remarkably pleasant. Yes, Pat was aware of a definite tension between her and Mike; but she was equally aware that he was working very hard to ease it, and that made a big difference. Her sons' presence helped matters, too. It was impossible not to relax in response to their unabashed appreciation of the food . . . impossible not to be drawn in by their eager, enthusiastic chatter.

Afterwards, while the boys were watching TV, Mike and Pat cleared the table and did the dishes in silence. Finally,

Pat sighed. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not exactly sure why I acted so badly."

"Well, the fact that I was acting like an insensitive bastard at the time may have had something to do with it," he returned forthrightly.

Pat cocked her head. "I'll accept your apology if you'll accept mine," she bargained tentatively.

A flare of warmth entered Mike's hazel eyes. "Gladly."

"Good." Pat shifted a little, then looked away from him. "That's all right, then," she murmured.

"Is it?" he questioned after a moment.

"I don't understand," she said uncertainly.

"I accept your apology. You accept mine. And we both avoid talking about the real issue," he elaborated. "That's not all right."

"What . . . real issue?" Pat asked suspiciously.

"Money," he said bluntly.

Pat winced. "You mean the fact that you have it and I don't?"

Mike took a deep breath. "We have to talk about this."

"Why?"

Mike tossed aside the red-and-white dish towel he'd been holding and took her by the shoulders.

"Look, Pat, I realize that we haven't known each other all that long. You've got a lot to learn about me. I've got a lot to learn about you. But, right now . . . well, I feel like I'm stumbling around in a minefield. And, to tell you the truth, I'm afraid of what's going to blow up next. I don't want it to be us."

"Us?" she questioned, searching his face.

"You and me."

Pat remembered with sudden clarity how Mike had opened up to her the first time they'd run together. It was only fair that she should do the same.

"Let's sit down," she said.

In the next hour or so, Pat told Mike how Jack had played the stockmarket, losing all their savings and plunging them deeply into debt. She couldn't hide the fact that she blamed herself for having gone passively along with him, for having been so dependent on Jack and so naive. She'd been so irresponsible.

"It wasn't your fault!" Mike told her sharply. He knew, just by looking at her, that she was tearing herself up inside.

"Yes, some of it was," she contradicted. "But in any case, the roof more or less caved in after Jack's death. The boys and I ended up losing just about everything. My folks and Jack's tried to help, but they're not rich people. There was an insurance settlement, thank heavens. I'm not sure how we would have made it through those first months without it."

"You would have found a way."

Pat stared at him, surprised by the conviction in his voice and the admiration in his eyes. "Mike, don't build me up into something I'm not," she protested.

"I don't have to build you up into anything. What you are is damned special."

"No, not really. I've got some big things going for me. Two terrific kids. A decent job. Loyal friends. My health." She pulled a face, fearing she was sounding like a saccharine greeting-card. "And, of course, there's always my free membership in Atlanta's most outstanding athletic club plus my personal Peachtree Road Race trainer, the well-known millionaire marathoner," she continued teasingly.

"Please!" he pleaded with an air of embarrassment that was only partly feigned. When he thought of how much he had and took for granted compared with how little she had. . . .

"I don't want you feeling sorry for me, Mike" Pat said suddenly.

Mike reached across the kitchen table and folded both of Pat's hands in his own. "Sweetheart, I wouldn't dare," he said and meant it.

"So, tell me more about this shop Elyse Holcomb is planning to open," Mike urged the following Saturday afternoon.

"I can tell you about the shop," Pat panted. "Or I can finish bicycling up Mount Everest! Not both."

They were in one of the main equipment rooms at P.T. Unlimited, riding side-by-side computerized exercycles. Though Pat felt her body straining to keep up with the moderate speed Mike had programmed her bike, she was also experiencing a sense of accomplishment watching the incremental increase register on the mileage readout. It gave her a rush to pride to see proof of her improving physical condition.

"You're doing great, Pat," Mike told her, giving her a grin and a wink. "Just a couple minutes more."

"And then what?" Pat demanded suspiciously.

After slightly more than three weeks of working out with him, Pat was wise to Mike's training technique. He didn't push her. He made friendly suggestions. Just one more lap in the pool, he'd suggest. Just one more mile on the road. It was sneaky. It was seductive and it was also sensationally effective.

"And then we stretch out and cool down."

"That's easy for you to say."

Mike just laughed, his muscled legs pumping the bike pedals with a relentless rhythm.

Watching Mike work out evoked some very basic, very erotic feelings in Pat. She'd never been one for eyeing men, but she liked looking at Mike. And what was more, she was learning to like having him look at her.

They'd kissed and caressed, touched and teased, with increasing frequency and fondness during the past three weeks. That they were going to end up making love together seemed inevitable to Pat. But just when the inevitable was going to happen was less clear. So far, Mike had let her set the pace. If he found that pace slow, he registered no complaint.

Pat closed her eyes for a moment, breathing deeply and still pedaling. School would be out for summer vacation in about a week, and Scott and Luke would be flying out to California to visit Jack's parents at the beach for three weeks. She couldn't help wondering . . .

"Pat?"

"Mmm?"

"Pat, you've finished the sequence," Mike voice informed her with a hint of laughter.

"What? Oh."

"Are you going to check your pulse?" he asked slyly. He'd been watching the rapidly changing expressions on her face for the last couple of minutes, and he had a very good idea what was going on inside her head.

"My pulse?" Pat repeated blankly. "Oh, that! Never mind, it's okay."

"Now, Pat," Mike reproved. "Didn't we talk about how important it is to keep track of your pulse rate after an aerobic workout?" And with no further ado, he reached over, deftly caught one of her hands, and pressed the tips of two fingers against the pulse point on the inside of her wrist. He felt a tremor run through her in response to his touch. One corner of his mouth turned up.

"Mike!" Pat glanced around. There weren't a lot of people in the equipment room at this particular time, but she had the distinct feeling that most of those who were present were checking out Peyton Michael Taylor's training technique.

"Shh," Mike replied. "I'm counting."

"I'm counting, too," she warned. "And if you don't give me back my hand by the time I reach—"

He released her hand, grinning, "All done," he announced easily. "Your pulse is a little fast, though."

"I suppose yours is slow and steady?" Pat demanded, her chest heaving.

"Ah, no," he drawled, "I wouldn't say that."

Pat glanced down at herself. She was wearing a bra underneath her leotard. Nonetheless, she could see the puckered rosettes of her nipples clearly outlined against the dark, stretchy fabric of the exercise garment.

Swallowing hard, Pat raised her eyes to Mike's. "I—I believe you said something about stretching out?" she asked.

"And cooling down."

"Any suggestions?"

"I'm considering a cold shower, myself."

Three weeks later, Pat sat at a candlelit restaurant with Mike. Her sons had left California that morning, and she was feeling thrillingly free—and a little scared.

"You know," Pat reflected thoughtfully, rubbing her index finger up and down the fragile crystal stem of her wineglass and darting Mike a half-provocative, half-plaintive look from beneath her long lashes. "I'm still waiting to hear what you and Scott and Luke were whispering about this morning at the airport. I mean, the way the three of you were huddled together! And then those incredibly serious handshakes . . ." She shook her head, "It's enough to make me a little paranoid."

Seated across from her at the restaurant, Mike smiled, his eyes glinting with amusement. "You think the guys and I were plotting against you, hmm?" he teased, taking a sip of wine.

"Well . . . I'm not quite sure what to think," she conceded wryly.

The friendship between Mike and her two sons had truly flowered in the last few weeks. The boys treated Mike as if he were a member of the family, and looked up to him as a role model.

Though Pat was extremely happy they had accepted Mike so easily, she couldn't help feeling just a tiny bit jealous of the rapport the three males in her life had established.

Mike made a sympathetic sound. Reaching across the linen-draped table, he stroked the back of her hand with slow, sensual soothing. "Don't feel left out, sweetheart. The truth is, Scott and Luke told me to take care of you while they were out in California. They had some very specific instructions."

"Oh," Pat was both touched and embarrassed.

"For example, Luke thought you'd probably feel pretty sad this evening without them around, so he suggested I take you somewhere 'really nice' for dinner."

"I see." Pat glanced around. They were seated at a discreetly private table for two in Blue's, one of Atlanta's most romantically elegant restaurants.

"Actually," Mike continued, "Luke suggested Pizza Hut. Blue's was my idea."

Pat intertwined her slim fingers with his strong ones. "I like the way you think, Mr. Taylor" she told him.

"Thank you," he returned. Lifting her hand, he brushed his lips against her knuckles. "And in case I haven't told you this already, I like the way you look tonight. I like it very much."

Blushing slightly, Pat brought the hand he'd just kissed to the base of her throat in a gesture that held a mixture of modesty and flirtation. "Thank you," she responded.

Mike squeezed her hand. "Would you like to dance?" he asked.

She nodded. They got up and Mike led

her to the dance floor.

Blue's employed a five-piece orchestra every Saturday evening. The music was as elegantly romantic as everything else about the restaurant.

"Mmm . . ." Pat sighed dreamily, letting the mood and the music take her. They moved in perfect harmony. It wasn't a matter of his leading and her following. They simply danced . . . together.

Just the way, her body told her, they would make love.

They danced in companionable silence for a few minutes; then the orchestra changed tempo. The tricky, syncopated rhythm turned languid without going lazy.

Mike gathered Pat up against him.

"Did you used to dance like this in high school?" he asked her softly. "Slow . . . sweet . . . torture?"

"Not . . . very often," Pat admitted, smiling at his words.

"What did you do? Beat the boys off with a stick?"

She gave a breathless little laugh. "Actually, if a boy wanted to dance close and I didn't, I used to sing in his ear." She paused a beat before adding, "Off-key."

Mike pressed his mouth against the top of her silky-curved head, breathing in her fragrance.

"I think it's only fair to tell you that I'm completely tone-deaf," he said in a low, husky whisper, tightening his hold on her by intimate, erotic increments.

Pat rested her cheek against the smooth-textured lapel of his jacket, headily conscious of the throbbing male strength she was arousing. "And I think it's only fair to tell you that I have no intention of singing in your ear if you want to dance close," she breathed.

They didn't speak for the rest of the song. When the music came to an end in a cascade of chords, only five more words were necessary between them.

"Come home with me?" Mike asked.

"Yes," Pat answered.

Mike was afraid—just a little—that he might be overly urgent with Pat. Overly urgent . . . and awkward.

His hands weren't quite steady when he unlocked his front door. They were even less steady when, after a heated hungry exchange of kisses, he threaded his fingers through Pat's and led her silently into his large, skylighted bedroom.

Pat was afraid—just a little—that she might be overly shy with Mike. Overly shy . . . and awkward.

She was well beyond innocence and prudish inhibitions. She was a sensual, sensitive woman who desired deeply. But she was also a widow who had lost her first and only lover three-and-a-half years before.

With a rustle of clothing, they undressed each other, at first hesitantly, but then with increasingly obvious pleasure, "My god, you are so lovely," Mike said, his eyes glowing emerald as he took in her nakedness. "Oh, Pat!"

His hands slid down her warm and willing body to catch and hold her hips.

Pat said Mike's name on a ragged sigh, then brought her own hands up to capture his head and keep it still.

Their lips met and fused.

Matched mouth to knee, they tumbled down onto Mike's bed.

Mike held himself in check, controlling the desire to touch Pat everywhere all at once.

Pat gazed at him with dark, liquid eyes, her lips parted and moist, her cheeks flushed. She reached out for him, then let her hands roam restlessly, randomly, over his taut male body.

She had never before felt this kind of feminine fever . . . never know this type of elemental, absolute need.

She wanted him. Now. Always.

She managed, somehow, to say it. More than that, she showed it.

An instant—an eternity—after that, Mike brought them totally together. Then, with infinite, exquisitely exercised care, he began to move.

Ecstasy caught Pat like an incoming tide, like a wave so intimate, so overwhelming, that there seemed no possibility but to surrender to it.

When Pat awoke, late the next morning, she was alone.

Expelling her breath in a sudden hiss, she sat up abruptly. "Mike?" she called. Her voice sounded strange to her ears. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Mike?"

More curious than concerned at this point, Pat got out of bed.

Combing her fingers through her hair, she padded slowly into the master bathroom.

Frowning just a little, Pat flicked on a light and peered into the mirror above the marble-countered sink. The face reflected back at her was a bit of a shock. Her mouth was kiss-bruised to the point of ripeness, and her heavy-lidded eyes were provocative in their smudged-shadow coating of leftover makeup. In all, she looked like . . . like . . .

Well, she looked like what she was. And what she was was a woman who had spend most of the night making love with a man who seemed to understand her needs and desires as well as—if not better than—she did herself.

But where was that man now?

Turning on the tap, Pat splashed some cool water on her cheeks, then put on a white P.T. Unlimited terry-cloth robe that hung on a ceramic hook on the back of the bathroom door.

As she was walking out of the bathroom, she heard the front door open. She found Mike in the parqueted foyer of his apartment. He was juggling two sodden brown grocery bags, a dripping umbrella,

and a jingling set of keys. He had his back to her, and he was cursing in a muffled undertone.

Pat opened her mouth to speak, but her breath caught at the tip of her throat, and the words clogged behind it. It struck her with sudden, lightning-bolt clarity that the man she was looking at wasn't just a man, he was her lover. What she and he had done last night had irrevocably changed the shape of their relationship. Mike was still Mike, yes, but he was so much more than that, too.

"What was she supposed to say? How was she supposed to act?"

And then Mike turned and saw her.

"Damn!" he exclaimed as the umbrella clattered to the floor and one of the grocery bags split open, releasing two cantaloupes, a cinnamon coffee cake, and a carton of eggs. "You're up!"

All right. It wasn't romantic. But it was wonderfully real. And, as she dissolved into helpless laughter, Pat realized that she found it gloriously reassuring.

Mike didn't mind Pat's laughing at him. Her sassy sense of humor was one of the many things that made her so special to him. Besides, Lord knew, he certainly deserved a little mocking for his unloverlike performance.

God, how he cared for her! He'd never felt for a woman what he felt for Patrice Webster.

Last night had burned him to the core, branded him for life. There had been no hesitations, no holding back between them after that first soul-shaking eruption of mutual passion.

The look in his eyes made Pat's body stir and her hear beat faster. "Mike," she murmured, "what possessed you to go grocery shopping at ten A.M. on a rainy Sunday morning?"

"The thought of having nothing to give you for breakfast," he responded. "The truth is, I considered going shopping yes-

terday but I didn't want to jinx anything."

Pat frowned. "Jinx anything?" she repeated inquiringly.

He ran his hand back through his hair. "I didn't want to seem too sure that I was going to have company for breakfast this morning," he said.

"Oh." Involuntarily, Pat's eyes flicked in the direction of his bedroom. "You did think—"

"I hoped," he amended. "I hoped from the bottom of my heart." He'd anticipated, expected. And he knew, that Pat had anticipated . . . expected . . . as well.

The intensity she heard in Mike's words sent a quicksilver thrill of pleasure radiating through Pat. She wanted to tell him she loved him.

"Pat?" Mike asked softly. The beauty he saw shimmering in the depths of her velvety brown eyes made him want to take her into this arms and keep her there forever.

"You should have woken me up this morning," she said.

He smiled. "Pat, if I'd woken you up, I never would have gotten to the grocery store."

The week that followed was full of conflicting emotions for Pat. Her relationship with Mike grew with each passing day, filling her with a joy and a sense of fulfillment she had never before experienced.

On the other hand, at the urging of Elyse Holcomb, she began touring the Atlanta banks for a loan, and her frustration grew each time she was turned down. Next week, maybe, she would have better luck, she told herself as the weekend approached.

Mike, sensing her nervousness, took her to Lake Lanier for the weekend. His father, away on a trip, had a cabin there where Mike thought Pat would be able to relax a little.

During Saturday and Sunday, he was

able to keep Pat's mind off the appointment she had scheduled for eleven forty-five on Monday morning. But when the alarm rang that morning, Mike woke up to find that Pat was already nervously getting herself ready in front of the mirror.

Please, he prayed silently, let her get the loan. It means so much to her.

Mike kicked back the sheets and got out of bed. "Good morning, Pat," he greeted her.

"Oh, hi, Mike," she returned vaguely as she brushed her hair.

"What time did you wake up this morning?" he asked.

"Your question assumes I got to sleep last night," she responded with a crooked smile.

"Pat . . ." Mike slipped an arm around her and drew her against him. "Take it easy. Tying yourself into knots *is not* going to help you with the interview at the bank."

Pat took a deep breath and expelled it slowly. "I know . . . I know . . ." she murmured, allowing herself to accept his physical support. Heaven knew, she'd been accepting plenty of his *emotional* support in recent days. She'd been swinging between hope and despair as today's bank interview approached. Getting a loan in order to invest in the shop was so very, very important to her, and Mike understood that. Pat loved him for his understanding, as she loved him for so many other things.

Yes. *She loved him.* She loved him with all her heart.

"Relax, sweetheart," he counseled softly. He wished desperately he could reassure her that everything was going to be all right, but he couldn't. He respected Pat too much to try to sugarcoat unpalatable realities.

Dipping his head, Mike kissed the place where Pat's right shoulder joined her neck. "Sweetheart, don't worry.

Sooner or later, you'll get that loan," he said. "Because you deserve it."

Mike met Pat at P.T. Unlimited that evening. As soon as he saw the set of her body, he knew what had happened. *Damn!*

"The bank turned you down." It wasn't a question.

Pat grimaced. "Well, actually, a Mr. Walter B. Houghton turned me down."

"There are other banks in Atlanta, sweetheart," he reminded her after several moments.

"I know," she replied lifting her chin. "I've applied to just about all of them."

Pat got three more rejections that week.

Mike let the situation ride as long as he could. He had to follow Pat's lead. He knew she was bitterly disappointed by the way things were going, but she did her best to hide her hurt, so he was forced to pretend he didn't see it.

Her response to the repeated rebuffs—and her apparently unshakable determination to keep pushing forward—filled him with admiration. Yet, mixed with that admiration was some anger. There was anger at the banks. There was anger at the late Jack Webster, as well. There was also, deep down, some anger at Pat. She needed money. He had it. Why didn't she turn to him for the loan?

Most of all, there was anger at himself. Why the hell couldn't *he*, loving Pat as he did, come up with a way of providing her with the funds she needed without compromising her pride or her independence?

The day Pat got her sixth rejection, he decided that it was time for him to do something. Sitting in his office, he placed a phone call to the president of the Atlanta bank that handled several of his business accounts.

"I have a rather delicate financial matter that requires some special handling,"

Mike told the man. "I'm hoping that you might be able to assist me with it. The situation is this: A friend of mine—a Patrice Webster—has applied to one of your branches for a loan. I doubt, under normal circumstances, that her application would be approved. Because of this, I want to act as cosignatory for her loan. I want to guarantee it. However, it's absolutely vital that this transaction be executed in such a way that Mrs. Webster is kept totally unaware of my participation . . ."

Pat phoned Mike at ten minutes after one the next afternoon. "I got it, Mike! The bank said yes. I got the loan!"

Any misgivings Mike had had about what he'd done vanished. Pat sounded incandescent with happiness. Her voice was bubbling with excitement. "Let's go out and celebrate," he proposed.

"No, I've got a better idea. Let's stay in and celebrate."

"I'm still having trouble believing it," Pat declared that evening, over an intimate dinner with Mike. "I got the loan. *I actually got the loan!*" She laughed, giddy with a combination of relief and triumph, then bent her head to kiss Mike. "Oh, Mike," she breathed after heady seconds. "I'm so happy."

"I know, sweetheart," he assured her, stroking her hair. He toyed teasingly with the sensitive outer rim of her ear. "And, believe me, I'm happy for you."

"Oh, I do believe you," she responded fervently. "You know," she reflected, "when the loan officer—Mr. Boltman—said my application had been approved, it was like . . . well, I don't know *what* it was like, to tell you the truth. I think I was in a state of shock. I must still be in a state of shock," she mused, "because I haven't even gotten around to thanking you."

Mike nearly spilled the champagne he was drinking all over the front of his shirt.

Could Pat possibly know about the loan?

"Mike?" Pat questioned, wondering why he looked so shocked by her words.

"Ahh—" He pulled himself back together. "Whatever I've done," he said, "it was my pleasure." He set down his glass.

"Whatever you've done . . ." she echoed softly, gazing at him and letting her heart show in her eyes. "What haven't you done, Mike? You've supported me . . . encouraged me . . . helped me . . ." She shook her head wonderingly. "And considering the way I acted a couple of times, I really don't know why."

"Yes, you do," he cut in, reaching across the table to take both her hands in his. "Anything—everything—I've done is because I love you, Pat. I love you and you know it. You *must* know it."

Pat closed her eyes for a moment, trying to absorb the silent explosion Mike's words touched off inside her. It wasn't an explosion of shock or surprise. It was an explosion of joy so intense that it left no part of her unchanged or untouched.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "And you must know I love you," she answered him. Their fingers intertwined and locked. "Oh, Mike . . ."

He brought her hands to his mouth and kissed one and then the other. "I want you to marry me, Pat," he told her.

"M-marry?"

He grinned. "Marry," he confirmed. He gazed deep into her eyes, his fingers tightening around hers. "What's your reaction, Pat?" he asked softly.

"My reaction is yes. Oh, yes, Mike!"

Pat floated through the rest of the day and the first half of the next on an ocean of happiness. Suddenly, all the pieces of her life had come together.

Then, just as suddenly, they all fell apart.

She got a call from the bank about one-thirty asking her to come in and sign some

additional papers for the loan.

Pat arrived just before closing time. She explained her business and, to her surprise, was directed to a decidedly harried young woman instead of the very staid, middle-aged male loan officer with whom she'd dealt before.

The young woman looked blank when Pat introduced herself. "Patrice Webster?" she repeated. She blinked as though a light bulb had just clicked on inside her skull. "Oh! Of course. The business loan. Um . . . just let me see here, all right?" With that, she began shuffling hastily through one of several stacks of papers on her cluttered desk.

"Ah—isn't Mr. Boltman here today?" Pat inquired.

The young woman sighed. "I'm afraid not. His wife took ill yesterday . . . Terrific! This is just what we're looking for." Smiling triumphantly, she brandished a manila file folder for a moment and then flipped it open.

"I suppose there are a million things for me to sign?" Pat asked lightly.

"Oh, no. Just a half million," came the unexpectedly joking reply. "Now, let me see—okay. Fine." The young woman nodded approvingly, skimming the documents. "This looks complete. Your signature goes by the X's. Please, take your time and read through everything." She handed Pat about two dozen stapled-together sheets of paper.

"Thank you," Pat said.

"You're welcome. And I do apologize for the confusion. I'm afraid it'll be tomorrow at the earliest before we get Mr. Taylor's signatures, but once we do, we'll send you—"

Pat froze in the act of turning over a page. "Mr. T-Taylor?" she asked. "Peyton Michael Taylor?"

"That's right."

Pat put down the pen and the documents. Suspicion knotted in her stomach.

"What," she asked very carefully, as though approaching a ticking bomb, "does *Peyton Michael Taylor* have to do with my loan?"

Pat couldn't remember when she'd felt so hurt—so angry.

Mike had gone behind her back. The man she'd loved and trusted—the man she'd thought understood her so well—had gone behind her back and used his influence to get her a loan.

She'd wanted to stand on her own two feet. Mike had known that. He'd *known* that! Yet what had he done? He'd reduced her to being a puppet dancing on the end of his purse strings.

Pat was going to cut those strings. Permanently. And if she ended up crumpled on the ground in a heap after she did so, then so be it. She'd been down before, and she'd found a way to get back up. She'd do it again . . . and again . . . and again, if she had to.

The elevator car Pat was riding in glided to a stop, and the doors whispered open to reveal the Atlanta corporate offices of P.T. Unlimited. She took a deep breath. After squaring her shoulders and stiffening her spine, she walked determinedly toward the polished teak reception desk.

Pat managed a nod, "Is Mike here?" she asked.

"He sure is," the receptionist confirmed cheerfully. Do you want me to buzz him for—"

"No," Pat refused quickly. "I'll surprise him." And, before the receptionist could take issue with this idea, she marched off toward Mike's corner office.

His door was closed. Pat didn't bother to knock. She simply turned the knob, jerked the door open, walked in. And closed the door behind her.

Mike was at his desk. When he glanced up, the expression on Pat's face made his

heart stop. "Pat, my God, what's wrong?" he asked, getting up and coming toward her.

Pat fumbled with the catch on the Manila envelope she was carrying. "Here!" she spat out as she got it open. She pulled out the papers from the bank and flung them at him. "Take them, Mike. They're yours."

Mike managed to clutch on to a few of the legal-sized sheets. A cursory glance at them told him almost everything he needed to know.

Dear Lord. She'd found out.

"Pat—" He discarded the papers he was holding and reached out to catch her by her upper arms.

Pat jerked away from him, shuddering violently. "I don't take charity, Mike!" she threw at him fiercely. "Not from you—not from *anybody*!"

"Dammit, this isn't charity, Pat!" he said, taking hold of her again. This time, when she tried to pull free, he didn't let go. "It's a *loan*."

"It's a *handout*!" she contradicted, shaking her head back and forth. "How could you, Mike? *How could you?*"

"How could I not?" he countered with an almost savage intensity. "Don't you understand? It was tearing me apart to see you being rejected over and over again. And if I'd thought there was a snowball's chance in hell that you'd have accepted a loan directly from me, I would have offered it to you up front. But I knew there wasn't." He paused, searching Pat's pale, upturned face for some sign that she believed him. He couldn't find one. "Pat . . . sweetheart . . ."

"Don't call me that!" Pat wanted to weep. "You *lied* to me, Mike. *You lied*. You said you understood what I'm trying to do with my life. You said you understood how important it is to me to be independent. And yet, you tried to put me in your debt . . . make me dependent . . . just

like before. Just like when I was married to Jack!"

"I'm not Jack Webster!" Mike exploded. "Jack Webster is dead and gone. And the woman you used to be when you were married to him is gone, too."

Pat averted her head. She was trembling. "Do you know how happy I felt when the bank approved my loan application two days ago?" she questioned tauntly. "Do you have any idea of the sense of accomplishment I felt? All of a sudden, I was more than Jack Webster's widow and Scott and Luke Webster's mother. I thought that at last I'd done something for myself . . . by myself." She turned her head back and looked at him. "That's what I thought—what I believed—until about an hour ago." She gestured. "But now I don't know what to think . . . what to believe. It's all gone, Mike."

Mike shook his head. "Pat, don't do this to yourself. It's not fair to you. It's not fair to me. And it's not fair to *us*."

"*Us?*"

"Yes, *us*!" He enclosed her hands with his palms and looked deep into her eyes. "Pat, your reaction is not fair . . . what I did was wrong. I know that. I'd like to think that I did it for the right reasons, but going behind your back and arranging the loan was wrong and I admit it. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. *I made a mistake!*"

"So did I," Pat responded, pulling her hands free of his. "There isn't any *us*, Mike. There's you. And there's me. Two different people. Two separate people."

"This is pride talking, Pat," Mike said, trying to control the anger and frustration welling up within him.

"Well, maybe pride is all I have at this point," she countered. "Good-bye, Mike."

"No! Don't you know you're the best thing that ever happened to me?" he demanded. "I love you!"

And she loved him, but she still had to

end it.

"Let me go, Mike," she repeated.

Pat was ready to beg and Mike saw that. The woman who wouldn't take what she considered charity was prepared to beg him to let her go.

He'd hurt her terribly. He'd tried, with all the best will in the world, to help her, and had, instead, ended up devastating her. He couldn't compound the injury by humiliating her as well.

Mike released Pat's hands.

When she walked out of his office, she took his heart with her.

Scott and Luke arrived back in Atlanta from California late the following afternoon. Although they were extremely happy to see their mother again, they immediately wanted to know why Mike hadn't accompanied her to the airport. At first, Pat evaded their questions. Eventually, though, she had to tell them the truth.

"Mike and I aren't going to be seeing each other anymore," she said.

Luke darted an alarmed look at Scott.

"Can me and Luke help, Mom?" her older son asked, his face serious.

"Oh . . ." It was more a sigh than an answer. "I'm afraid not, Scott . . . Luke. This is something I have to take care of myself." Pat shared a smile between them. "But I love you both very much for offering."

"We—we love you, too," Scott responded.

"Yeah, we really do," Luke affirmed. "And—and it's okay if Mike isn't here. Who needs him, anyway?"

Pat needed Mike.

She came to that inevitable and unalterable conclusion in the early hours of the following morning as she tossed and turned after a night of almost no sleep and even less rest. She hurt. She *ached*. Yet the yearning she felt was much more than

a physical thing. She missed Mike in every way it was possible for a woman to miss a man.

But he'd lied to her! He'd manipulated her! He'd gone behind her back . . .

He'd tried to help her. He'd gone about it in the worst of ways, perhaps, but he had tried to help her.

Pat sat up, massaging her throbbing temples with her fingers and recalling the exchange she and Scott had had after Luke had gone to bed. Her older son had been unshakably determined to find out what had happened while he'd been away. In the end, Pat had responded to his questions—well, to some of them, at least.

"I—I don't get it," he'd said, frowning, after she'd finished her account. "You needed money to be a partner in Aunt Elyse's food store, right?"

Pat had nodded.

"Only the banks wouldn't lend you any, right?"

Pat had nodded again.

"Then Mike fixed it so one *would*."

"Well, Scott—"

"So why," he'd plunged on, "are you unhappy with him? He was doing a good thing, wasn't he? I mean, wasn't he helping you?"

"Scott, you have to try to understand. I couldn't take money from Mike—"

"Why not? What's the big difference between getting a loan from a bank and getting one from Mike?"

"The big difference is—is—" she'd gestured. "It has to do with being independent."

Scott had stared at her then. "You mean you can't be independent if somebody helps you?" he'd asked simply.

Pat closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

Of course that wasn't what she meant. Lord, if accepting "help" meant losing one's independence, then she'd forfeited hers long before the episode with the bank

loan. She could barely begin to name all the people who had helped her in the past three-and-a-half years.

And Mike. Hadn't he "helped" her? Hadn't he counseled her . . . encouraged her . . . supported her . . .

Loved her?

None of these things had made her fear for her independence. If anything, Mike had given her a new sense of strength and worth. Then *why* had she overreacted?

Because it was a matter of money.

Pat opened her eyes. That was it, wasn't it? *Money*. Mike had nailed the matter square on the head when he'd pushed the issue the night he'd shown up with the steaks. He'd seen how . . . how . . . what? How twisted? How obsessed? How *irrational* she was when it came to money?

Lord, and to think she'd prided herself on how well she'd come to cope with financial matters in the wake of Jack's death! To think that she'd believed she was handling things! She'd swung from one extreme to the other, and she hadn't even realized what she was doing.

She realized it now. The question was . . . what could she do about it? She sighed deeply. For the time being, she just had to get some rest from all these emotions. In two days, she would be running in the Peach Tree Road Race, and the way she'd felt these last forty-eight hours was enough to undo all her laborious training with Mike.

Mike. He, too, was going to be running in the race. He'd announced that to her the day before the bank episode. Smiling, he'd told her that this race was going to be different for him. He was going to run for himself this time, not to prove anything to his father. For himself, and for her. For the two of them.

It was craziness to think that he could find a single individual among the literally

tens of thousands of runners who had gathered in front of the Lenox Square shopping mall for the start of the Peachtree Road Race, of course; but Mike looked for Pat anyway. He looked and hoped. But he had no luck.

Mike was distantly aware that his presence in the field was stirring both surprise and interest in many of the runners around him.

Mike closed his eyes, flexing his long legs and shaking his arms a little. He could feel the heat of the day penetrate his skin and envelop his muscles. He'd *never* been "out there all by himself." His father had always been there with him.

But no more. He was his own man now.

Mike opened his eyes. He would run this race right. He would run it the way he should have run all the races that had come before it. And, after he'd run it, he'd stand by the finish line and wait for Pat.

A quick, collective intake of breath.

A starter's gun.

Mike was off.

It was madness to think that she could find a single individual among the literally tens of thousands of runners who had gathered in front of the Lenox Square shopping mall for the start of the Peachtree Road Race, of course; but Pat looked for Mike anyway. She looked and hoped. But she had no luck.

And yet, Mike was there with her. Because of him, she knew what to expect from this race . . . from herself.

Pat took a deep breath, then let it out. Oh Mike. She wanted to see him. To talk to him. To tell him she'd been wrong—so wrong. She wanted to explain why she had acted as she had and why she didn't think she'd ever act that way again.

She wanted Mike to understand that, like him, she'd come to terms with her past.

She wanted him to know she loved him.

You and me, Mike, Pat prayed silently, closing her eyes and invoking her dearest wish. Us. Together. Please, God. Don't let it be too late.

Pat opened her eyes. She was going to run this race. She was going to finish it—do it right, just the way she'd promised herself months before. And after she'd finished it, she was going to find Mike.

Somewhere, far, far up ahead, the starter's gun sounded.

Finish the race. Wait for Pat.

Mike was running ninth in the field now and reciting those six words over and over like a mantra. His ranking in the race made little difference to him, in all truth. He wasn't running to win. The sole reason Mike had entered the Peachtree Road Race was to run it with Patrice Webster. He'd wanted to be with her every stride of the way, cheering her on.

So what was he doing running ninth? What was he doing running in the wrong direction?

All that lay ahead of him was a finish line. His *future* was somewhere behind him.

Mike wheeled around and started running back the way he'd come.

He found Pat about a mile beyond the grueling long hill that ran in front of Piedmont Hospital. He spotted her a good hundred yards away. She was also, by some miracle, on the same side of the road he was.

Pat's first thought when she saw Mike was that she was hallucinating. Her second thought was that she might faint. Her lungs seemed to falter for a moment and her knees turned wobbly . . .

Pat shut her eyes for an instant, but she didn't stop.

"Don't give up, sweetheart," a dearly familiar male voice said. "You can do it."

Pat's eyes popped open. *It was Mike.* He was running next to her, and he was

smiling with a vibrancy that made her feel as though her bloodstream had been filled with an electric current.

She said his name.

"You can do it, Pat," he answered. "You can do *anything*."

"Including . . . including getting you to . . . forgive me?"

He was the one to close his eyes and doubt reality then. "There's nothing to forgive—*shee—yaugh!!*"

"Mike!" Pat screamed with all the breath she had left as she saw him stumble and go sprawling flat. "Oh, Mike!"

She was squatting beside him in an instant.

"I'm okay," Mike lied through gritted teeth.

"No, you're not okay!" Pat insisted fiercely, touching him with shaking hands. Oh, dear Lord; he was *hurt*!

"No . . . I'm not," he agreed wryly. "But I've been worse."

"Can you get up?" Pat asked. "I'll help you to a medical station."

The word *help* had a very strange effect on Mike.

"You mean you're going to drop out of the race?" he demanded, grabbing her by the upper arm.

Pat blinked. "Forget about the race, Mike!"

"The hell I will!" he answered, his fingers digging into her bare flesh. "I screwed up your dream of investing in Elyse's shop—"

"You screwed up?" Pat echoed disbelievingly, momentarily forgetting his injury and her concern. "I'm the one who—oh, God, Mike! The way I acted toward you. The things I said. I'm sorry. *I'm so, so sorry*. I understand now. You believed in me, in what I'm trying to do—"

"*I believe* in you," he said, emphasizing the present tense. He reached out, touching the curve of her flushed cheek. "You're going to finish this race, Pat. You

told me how much finishing this race means to you the first day we met. I'm not going to let you throw that away because of me."

"You expect me to run off and leave you here?"

"Yes."

"*No!* Do you think finishing the Peachtree Road Race would mean anything to me with you lying hurt?" Pat shook her head. "I'm not leaving you, Mike."

Stubborn brown eyes met determined gray-green ones.

"Then help me," Mike said after a long moment.

"What?"

"*Help me*. Let me lean on you, Pat. We can make it across the finish line—together."

Pat stared at him. Then, without any hesitation, she got to her feet and offered Mike her hand, her arm, her shoulder—her *help*—and anything else he wanted.

They didn't do it quickly. And they certainly didn't do it with anything approaching Olympic style. But Pat and Mike made it across the finish line of the Peachtree Road Race the best way they knew how.

Together.

Many, many hours later, Pat lay cradled in the curve of Mike's strong arm, her face turned up to his.

"How's your back feeling?" she questioned, moving her body in voluptuous invitation. She reached up and stroked his cheek.

A wickedly sexy chuckle rippled up from deep within his belly. "Considering what we've been doing for the last couple of hours, don't you think it's a little late to be asking that?"

Pat pulled away from him just a little, a spark of concern appearing in her eyes. "Mike—?"

He chuckled again and touched her in a way that was meant to soothe but did far

more to stimulate, "I'm absolutely fine, sweetheart," he assured her. "In fact . . . I can't remember when my body felt this good."

Pat relaxed. Twisting slightly, she planted a kiss on his chin. "It was nice of Elyse to take Scott and Luke for the night, wasn't it?"

"Well, considering those two seemed bent on leaving us alone to 'celebrate,' I don't think she had much choice."

Pat gave a little laugh. "I think the Peachtree Road Race T-shirts we gave them helped."

"Helped? I don't know if you overheard this, but Scott and Luke are planning to wear them to our *wedding*."

"Our wedding . . ." Pat sighed, conjuring up dreams. "And when would you like

to get married?"

"Soon," Mike informed her decisively. "Certainly before you and your partner open your new food shop."

Pat bit her lip for a moment, fighting back tears. "Thank you for offering me the loan again," she whispered.

"Thank you for accepting it."

"I love you, Mike."

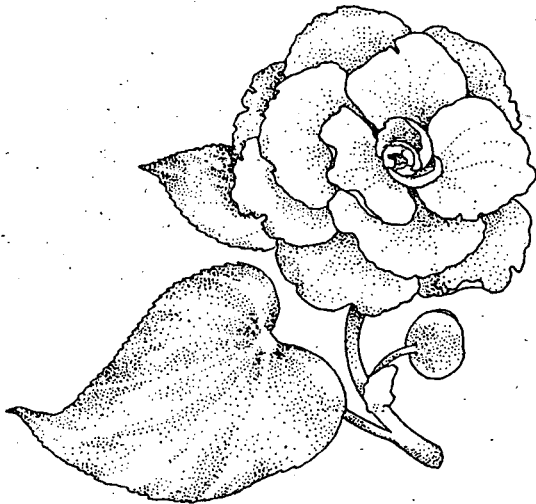
"And I love you."

"Together?"

"Always."

Some people, Pat reflected, looked for a pot of gold at the rainbow's end. Some people found it.

And some people, like herself and Mike, ended up with something better than gold. Something much, much better.





Never Say Never

Holly McKenna doesn't want to give in to the passion she feels for her best friend and neighbor, Thomas Crockett. But soon their desire becomes undeniable, and neither Holly nor Tom are able to resist.

COURTNEY RYAN

From *Never Say Never* by Courtney Ryan. Copyright © 1988 by Courtney Ryan. Published by permission of The Berkley Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

“Unhand me, you villainous reptile! I shall never marry you. My heart belongs to Donald Goodenough, the fearless mountie of the north. Your bribes are wasted . . . bribes are wasted . . .”

Holly paused thoughtfully, nibbling on a ragged fingernail. What was the next line? Her mind was blank. She snuggled deeper into her bed and stared morosely into the dark. She'd managed to kill another forty minutes of the endless night reciting lines from the classic melodrama,

“The Curse of the Aching Heart.” Although it had been nearly ten years since she had portrayed the beleaguered heroine in her senior class play, she had still managed to recall nearly every line from the first two acts. Not bad for a twenty-seven-year-old insomniac.

Here it was two o'clock in the morning and the twenty-seven-year-old insomniac was wide awake and fresh out of diversions to pass the sleepless hours.

“I give up,” Holly muttered, tossing

back the covers and kicking the cramps out of her legs. Obviously this was going to be one of those all-too-frequent white nights when sleep simply wasn't in the cards. Cards. Now there was a thought. A nice long game of solitaire would help pass the time.

Barefoot and bright-eyed, a flannel nightshirt flapping at her knees, she rummaged through the junk drawer in her kitchen for a deck of cards. Organization was not her forte, and it was no surprise when she found only a water-spotted, dog-eared ace of spades. She would simply pop over to the neighbor's apartment across the hall and borrow a deck of cards.

Granted, your ordinary neighbor would consider it a strange hour to visit. Fortunately, Thomas Crockett was no ordinary neighbor.

Holly didn't bother with a robe or slippers. Thomas would have been astonished if she had. Their friendship had long since progressed beyond the "Mercy, I must look a fright" stage. She stuck her head cautiously out her door, looking first left, then right. Thomas might be allowed to see her looking like something the cat had dragged in, but she preferred that dubious honor to remain his, and his alone.

The coast was clear. Holly darted across the hallway. She rapped softly on his door, then turned the handle and walked in. Poor Crockett's living room was in chaos: a jigsaw puzzle littered the coffee table, books and magazines were scattered over the sofa, and the television was buzzing test patterns. An empty pint of chocolate chip ice cream and crumpled bag of cheese-flavor tortilla chips shared the dining room table with an open briefcase and a jumble of manila folders. Obviously Thomas had been fighting a white night of his own.

Holly flicked off the television, then followed the sound of an electric mixer into the kitchen. Thomas was hunched

over the counter with his back to her, reading aloud from a cookbook while beating something in a large bowl.

"... slowly blending liquid mixture with oats and flour. The batter will be somewhat stiff' ... somewhat stiff? Hell, it looks like cement ..."

Holly folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the doorframe, watching the little domestic scene with a lopsided smile. Crockett looked kind of sweet with his nose buried in a cookbook. His tawny-brown hair was too long, his San Francisco Forty-Niners T-shirt was too small, and his black sweat pants were dusted with flour. A white dish towel was tied around slim hips.

"'Fold in chocolate chips gently,'"

Thomas muttered, clicking off the mixer and setting it on the counter. "Fold? What do they mean, fold? What am I supposed to do here, pleat the stupid cookies?"

"Just stir the chips in," Holly said.

Thomas jumped, thumping his head on the upper cabinet. He turned slowly, pinning her against the wall with Newman-blue eyes. Sweat-dewed hair tangled over his forehead and a smear of flour emphasized one high cheekbone. Six feet of simmering insomnia.

"Temper, temper," Holly murmured.

"How many times," Thomas asked with deceptive softness, "have I told you to knock?"

"I did knock, but you were making too much noise in here to hear me. You know, you should wear a dish towel more often. It becomes you."

"And you're a vision in orange flannel," Thomas snapped, rubbing the aching lump on his head. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"I need to borrow some cards." Holly brushed past him, stealing a pinch of very stiff dough from the mixing bowl. "You know, this isn't half-bad," she said, licking her fingers. "What are you making?"

"Chocolate coconut toasties," Thomas said from behind her. Then strong brown arms slipped the dish towel around her waist and knotted it tightly at the small of her back. "And since you were responsible for wounding the cook you can finish the job. I'm sick of playing Betty Crocker."

"I suppose it's the least I can do since I gave poor little Tommy such a fright. Rest your sleepless body on a bar stool and I'll show you how it's done." She fluttered her eyelashes at him over her shoulder. "Pay attention, Crockett."

"I am." And he was. At any time of night or day, dressed in orange flannel or black satin, Holly McKenna was every schoolboy's dream. Wheat-blond curls edged her face, tumbling in disheveled layers halfway down her back. Angelic velvet-brown eyes shimmered with devilish light. And her mouth—the world would never see the like again. Her lips were molded with an erotic sensuality, soft and full and rich. Building up an immunity to her heartbreaking appeal had been a slow and agonizing process. Fortunately, Thomas Crockett was a fighter. The first day he had laid eyes on this bewitching insomniac, he had known any sort of romantic relationship would be sheer insanity. She had moved into the Victorian Arms twelve months earlier, assisted by a volunteer army of enthusiastic male admirers. Thomas had watched from his window, grinning as a pair of muscle-bound college types risked herniating themselves lifting a piano for the lady with the killer smile. Definitely the sort of woman men die for—and Thomas had no intention of putting his happy, healthy heart in jeopardy.

That first impression proved to be nothing short of inspiration. Over the course of the next few months, Thomas's platonic friendship with Holly revealed the twists and turns of a capricious fate. Never were

two people less suited to one another. Like Thomas, Holly happened to be an only child, beloved, adored, and shamelessly indulged. The ability to compromise was a skill neither of them had quite mastered. A blissful romance between a woman who was usually right and a man who was seldom wrong? The mind boggled.

And there was more. They discovered they both worked for rival advertising agencies, Holly as a layout editor, Thomas was an account executive. They both had highly volatile tempers. Thomas was forever forgetting to pick up his laundry and Holly was forever forgetting to drop hers off. Simply put, they had too much in common ever to be . . . companionable. Still . . . Thomas was only human. He stared fixedly at the shortened version of Holly's nightshirt, caught up several inches by the knotted dish towel. "So what have you been up to tonight?"

Holly shrugged. "I had a date. Dinner and dancing. After I got home I cleaned my oven. I painted my toenails. I practiced my yoga exercises. I took a thirty-minute bubble bath and drank a glass of warm milk and honey. Nothing worked. I still couldn't sleep. I finally decided to play solitaire, but I needed another fifty-one cards."

Thomas watched the overhead light pick out the ivory shadings in her hair. "Fifty-one cards."

"I found the ace of spades in my kitchen drawer."

"I see." Thomas told himself he wasn't going to ask whom she had been with. He told himself if he was going to ask, he was at least going to be tactful about it.

"Where did you go dancing?"

"Club Antoine." Holly tore the bag of chocolate chips open with her teeth. "Brian has a membership." After a slight hesitation: "What about you? I saw you leaving earlier. Did my eyes deceive me, or were you actually wearing a tuxedo?"

"I was actually wearing a tuxedo," Brian Harris. That curly-haired yuppie stockbroker with the body-builder's physique. And the night before that she'd gone out with David what's-his-name, the English lit. professor from Berkeley. As a matter of fact, Professor David had been quite a fixture lately, which was unusual for Holly. Ordinarily she was of the no-strings-attached persuasion.

Thomas suddenly found it very hard to sit still. He rose from the bar stool, looking around the kitchen for something to occupy his hands. His gaze settled on the curvaceous blonde folding his cookie dough. Was it just his imagination, or was his willpower becoming a little frayed around the edges lately?

He raked his fingers through his hair and asked thickly, "Do you want me to preheat the oven?"

"Yes. Three-fifty." Holly scooped and rolled the cookie dough absently, still wondering about that tuxedo. It wasn't unusual for Thomas to dress in black tie now and again, but in the middle of the week? Not to mention that he had been carrying a small, gift-wrapped box when he left the building. Candy? Jewelry? "So what was the occasion?" Holly asked casually.

"What? Oh . . . the tuxedo. Ruth's father was having a fund-raising dinner, one of those billion-dollar-a-plate deals. Since I was a guest of the senator's daughter, I got my stuffed chicken breast free of charge. I was touched."

"I'll bet you were." Holly sounded almost querulous to her own ears. She bombed the cookie sheet with chocolate speckled torpedoes. Ruth Reynolds was extremely right, socially prominent, and ultrasophisticated. Other than that, she had absolutely nothing going for her. "Good old Ruthless. Did you have a nice time?"

"Sure. I love chicken breasts."

Holly shoved the cookie sheet into the oven and set the timer. "Do you have any ice cream?" she asked suddenly.

"I think so. Check in the freezer."

"And bananas? What about chocolate syrup? We could make banana splits. Have you got any whipped cream?"

Her abruptness and the earnest tone she used made him smile. "You never eat like that unless you're nervous. What are you nervous about, McKenna?"

"Of course I'm nervous," she returned quickly. Her dark, haunting eyes stretched wide in a pantomime of maidenly distress, a la *The Curse of the Aching Heart*. "I'm alone with you in the wee hours of the morning, dressed in such a way that could only inflame a man's senses—"

Thomas cast a droll glance at her orange jammies. "You've got to be kidding."

"—entirely at your mercy." Her beautiful mouth affected sorrow. "Do with me what you will."

"Does it occur to you that I might do just that?" he asked thoughtfully.

"Never."

Something clicked behind his eyes, a brilliant, curious light. "Really?"

Holly shrugged with cheerful indifference. "I'm not criticizing you, believe me. Actually it's very comforting, having a male friend who isn't—"

He didn't move a muscle. "A threat?"

"Let me put it another way." She realized her words had stung him, though she wasn't sure why. Thomas had never shown any indication of wanting to deepen their present relationship into something more intimate. It was one of the reasons she felt so comfortable with him, enjoying the freedom simply to be herself. "I think of you as a friend, rather than—"

"A man?" Thomas finished for her.

"Yes. No." The kitchen timer went off and Holly sighed her relief, although she couldn't imagine how they could be done so quickly. "You'd better get your cookies

out, Crockett. They'll burn."

Thomas was unusually quiet as he retrieved the cookie sheet from the oven. The kitchen was unusually quiet.

"I suppose I'd better leave," Holly murmured finally, huffing impatiently at the knotted dish towel around her waist. "I have a big day tomorrow. I need to get a presentation ready for the U.S. Express people by noon."

"Oh, you don't need to leave yet," Thomas said. "Why don't you come into the living room and have a drink with me?"

Holly stared at him, her gaze whimsical. "You don't drink, Crockett. Neither do I."

His smile became coaxing, his eyes touching on her mouth. "That's true. Then come sit with me. I'll put on some music. We'll . . . talk."

There was nothing unusual in his suggestion. They often wiled away the midnight hours listening to Thomas's favorite Rickie Lee Jones album. Occasionally they would play gin or poker, anteing with peanut M&M's while Thomas practiced the fine art of dealing from the bottom of the deck. More often than not, the game would end in a heated argument, with Thomas wearing a bowl of M&M's on his head.

No, there was nothing unusual in the suggestion—just in the way it was made. She gave him half of his smile back, fumbling with the knotted dish towel at her waist. "Actually, I probably should be getting back. If I could . . . just get this knot untied . . ."

Holding her in warm, lazy gaze, Thomas moved closer, boxing her into a corner with a wrought-iron plant stand at her back. "Turn around," Thomas commanded patiently. "I'll free you from that nasty dish towel."

She faced the plant stand, bushy philodendron leaves tickling her chin. She felt Thomas's hands at the small of her back,

felt the warmth from his body so close to her own. She recognized with something like amazement the startling chills whispering up and down her spine. This was Thomas, for heaven's sake. Her friend on a good day, a thorn in her side on the bad days. Never once in the past twelve months had he given any indication that he was in danger of losing his head over Holly McKenna. His temper, yes . . . his head, no. She trusted him. She liked him. He was predictable in his own stubborn ways. He was comfortable.

And he was kissing her neck. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Experiment."

Holly's hair had tumbled forward, limiting her vision to yellow-veined philodendron leaves. "What sort of experiment?"

"You hurt my feelings, Holly." His breath stirred the tendrils of hair at her temple. "Tell me you didn't mean it."

Her hands stilled the caressing motions of his fingertips at her waist. "Didn't mean what?"

In an injured voice he said, "Telling me you didn't think of me as a man. That wounded me to the quick, Holly." Another featherlight kiss on the curve of her jaw. "I don't think you should be too comfortable around me, McKenna . . . it wouldn't be wise."

Holly was smelling more than the tantalizing fragrance of his after shave. She was also smelling a rat. Very slowly she turned to face him, storm clouds building in her dark, dark eyes. Then she ducked under his arms and walked quickly into the living room, fingers clenched into tight fists. "One of these days . . ." she muttered. She threw open his door with force, happily anticipating the crunch of the door-knob embedding itself into the sheetrock. Appearing from nowhere, Thomas caught the door in a neat little move and swung it shut again. Holly

jumped backward to avoid a broken foot, swearing beneath her breath.

"That's no way for a lady to talk," Thomas admonished, amusement brimming in his light-filled eyes. "Temper, temper, sweetheart."

Holly rounded on him, five feet six inches of blond indignation. "I suppose you think that was funny? Just what was the purpose of your little experiment? Were you feeling a little insecure, Crockett? Wondering how I could have survived all this time without succumbing to your charm?"

"The thought did occur," Thomas murmured, tongue-in-cheek. "McKenna, aren't you overreacting a little bit? I was only teasing you. Don't blow a gasket."

After a long silence: "I see." Holly dipped her head, looping her hair behind her ears in a childish gesture. Her voice was thready, less than a whisper. "I understand. Well, goodbye then." And then, flustered, she fled.

"You don't look happy. Your presentation went over like gangbusters this morning. You should be grinning from dimple to dimple, sweet cakes."

Holly slapped on a toothy smile strictly for Zack Robbins's benefit.

"Oh, that's better," he said. "Now you look like Bugs Bunny. What's with you today? You snarl, you moan, you mope." His jaw went suddenly slack, a horrified look passing over his face. "Oh hell . . . it isn't time for hormones again, is it? Why couldn't I have shared an office with a male layout editor? A man has the same delightful personality every day of the month."

"Why don't you take your slide ruler and—"

"If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all," Zack admonished sternly. "Didn't your mommy ever teach you anything? There's no need to be sensi-

tive about hormones. Why don't you just tell me what's bothering you? We can talk. We're both on the same pay scale."

Holly sighed, tugging her purse out of her desk drawer. "I'll give you a hint. It's the first Friday of the month, Zack."

"Let me think." Zack tapped a pencil against his front tooth. "First Friday . . . Oh, of course. I should have known by the happy anticipation on your face. You're going to lunch with good old Jason Passco. No wonder you're breaking out in hives."

"Am I?" Holly pulled a compact mirror from her purse and flipped it open. Yes, there they were . . . itsy-bitsy pink dots rising up on her neck. Like Jason, they arrived on the first Friday of every month. Like Jason, they departed immediately after lunch. Holly's ex-husband was a man who took his responsibilities very seriously. Although they had been divorced for over two years, he still insisted on taking Holly to lunch once a month and assuring himself that all was well with her.

"I watch Passco on the WVTB news," Zack said. "He's kind of a yuppie Walter Cronkite, y'know? Those intense brown eyes and that gravelly voice. It's kind of hard to think of the two of you as a couple."

"It's kind of hard for me, too," Holly said. "We were only married for six months. Grand effort, wasn't it?"

Zack shrugged. "Once you know you've made a mistake, there's no sense in prolonging the agony."

Privately Holly couldn't agree more. If only she'd recognized her mistake before she'd married the man with the deep brown eyes and the mesmerizing voice.

"Actually, Jason was the one in agony," Holly said glumly. "His shirts were never back from the laundry on time. His wife was habitually late for dinner engagements. He hired a housekeeper, but she couldn't quite keep up with me. There

was always something out of place somewhere, and it drove him crazy. He never said anything, though. He was too polite." She sighed, probing the beginnings of a headache at her temples. "I'll never know why he married me."

"It doesn't take a genius to figure that out," Zack offered cheerfully. "Darling girl, you are one of the most devastatingly beautiful young women on the planet California. A perfect specimen, which no doubt appealed to your perfect Jason. It's too bad the poor man couldn't cope with the fact you were also human."

"He tried, believe me." Holly slung her purse over her shoulder, giving Zack a thumbs-up. "Wish me luck. When I eat out with Jason, I'm always terrified I'm going to spill something."

"Blame it on your hormones," Zack advised.

Holly's hives had disappeared by the time she returned home. The spaghetti sauce on her blouse hadn't. She stared morosely at the bright orange stain over her left breast while the Victorian Arms Bullet tugged and squealed its way to the third floor. Riding in the old-fashioned elevator, which resembled a wrought-iron bird cage, was an experience to be savored. Since it took an eternity to climb from the bottom floor to the top, there was ample time for savoring.

Luncheon had gone just as expected. Jason was the perfect gentleman. Holly was . . . Holly. At the end of the meal Jason had kissed her gently on the forehead and told her she hadn't changed a bit. Then he'd brushed a bread crumb off her shoulder and tucked a stray curl into place.

Holly had plans for tonight. A long hot bath, an orgy with a Sara Lee Black Forest cake, and a Sidney Sheldon paperback. She was celebrating. She had a full thirty days until her standing date with Jason

rolled around again.

The elevator ground to a halt three inches above the third floor. Holly hopped from the bird cage to the hallway and straight into a choking cloud of Halston perfume. She knew only one person who applied perfume with a ladle.

"Holly!" Ruth Reynolds was standing in front of Thomas's door, her arms full of bulging grocery bags. "It is Holly, isn't it? We met at a party Thomas gave last month—"

"Yes, I remember." Holly offered the last plastic smile in her inventory. It had been that kind of a day. "How are you, Ruth?"

Green eyes darted this way and that beneath feathered auburn bangs. "I'm frantic! I wanted to surprise Thomas with a lovely home-cooked meal, but my hairdresser was running late, and— Well, you don't want to hear about my dreadful day. Could you just hold these bags for me while I look for my key?"

Holly took the groceries automatically, feeling a cold little fist curling in the pit of her stomach. Thomas had given Ruth a key to his apartment? It took Holly a moment to assimilate that bit of news. Obviously Thomas was more involved with the senator's daughter than he let on.

"I found it." Ruth produced a key from her beaded evening bag with a flourish. "Hopefully I still have time to put the steaks on before he comes home. I so enjoy quiet dinners at home."

Holly's brows were a questioning arch as she studied Ruth's "quiet dinner at home" dress. She couldn't see much of it beneath the white fur jacket she wore, but then again, there wasn't much to see. Silk, sequins, and bosoms.

"Have a nice evening," Holly said, returning the groceries with some force. "If you'll excuse me, I've had a dreadful day of my own."

Holly burrowed into her apartment,

changing her spaghetti-spotted career-woman's suit for a sweat shirt and jeans. Then she grabbed an old leather jacket from the hall closet. A nice long walk would blow the cobwebs out of her mind.

In the hallway the aroma of sizzling steaks mingled with the faint trace of perfume. Holly passed Crockett's door with her hands over her ears. A childish gesture. While she waited for the Bullet, she asked herself just what it was she had been afraid of hearing. The answer surprised her.

Laughter. She didn't want to hear them laughing together.

The traveling bird cage slowly ground to a halt, some three inches below floor level. It wasn't empty. Thomas Crockett grinned at Holly from behind the wrought-iron bars. And standing next to him in a powder-blue suit was a striking silver-haired woman who looked vaguely familiar. She was in her mid-fifties, with impossibly high cheekbones and startling, sky-blue eyes. Thomas's eyes . . .

"Just take my arm and hop up here."

"I don't know why you live here," the older woman muttered. "I really don't. I never know where this elevator is going to stop. One of these days I expect to be crawling out of here on my stomach and dropping six feet to the floor. Thomas, with your money, you certainly could afford—"

"Mother, I'd like you to meet someone." Thomas smiled at Holly, patting his mother on her shoulder pad. "Holly, this is my mother, Leigh Crockett. Mother, this is Holly McKenna, a good friend and neighbor."

Had Holly been introduced as something other than a good friend and neighbor, she had no doubt that she would have come under closer inspection. As it was, Mrs. Crockett gave her a rather vague smile and a standard "Nice to meet you."

"Mom decided to surprise me with a

visit," Thomas said, adopting the air of one who has received a great treat. "She was waiting downstairs in the lobby when I got home."

"Where do you live, Mrs. Crockett?" Holly asked politely.

"In San Francisco." Mrs. Crockett threw her son a searing glance. "Barely a fifteen-minute drive from here. Still, if I want to see my son, I've learned not to sit at home and pray for a visit." Mrs. Crockett paused, wrinkling her aristocratic nose. "My word . . . what is that smell? It's rather like . . . sweet pot roast. How horrible."

Holly's eyes widened. She looked from Thomas to his mother to the door of Thomas's apartment. She remembered Ruth. She remembered the silk and the sequins and the bosoms. Oh, the bosoms. Mrs. Crockett did not look the type to appreciate Ruth's "quiet dinner at home" dress.

"I should be going," she murmured faintly. "You have a big night ahead of you, Thomas."

"Why don't you come over for dessert later?" Thomas asked, puzzled by the abrupt change in Holly's mood. "My mother makes a lemon souffle that melts in you—"

"I couldn't," Holly said quickly. "Really, I just . . . couldn't. Mrs. Crockett, it's been lovely meeting you. I hope to see you again soon. Thomas, I hope the three of you have a lovely dinner."

Thomas frowned. "Three of us?"

"I meant the two of them. Of you. The two of you." Holly escaped into the Bullet, avoiding direct eye contact with poor Crockett. "Good night, all."

"Holly—"

"Good night, Thomas." Her voice floated up the elevator shaft. "Bon appetit."

Thomas's apartment was ominously quiet when Holly came in from her walk.

She tiptoed past his door, trying to analyze the odors coming from within. Sweet pot roast. A hint of lemon. And could that be onion soup? What a feast Thomas was having.

Considerably more cheerful than when she had left, Holly dug into the Black Forest cake with gusto. David Hartvigson telephoned halfway through her orgy and invited her to the university's production of "The Tempest" on Monday. Holly enjoyed spending time with David. He was considerate and attentive, but never cloying. He often wore rumpled tweed jackets and scuffed loafers, neither of which Jason would have been caught dead in. Another plus. Holly accepted with pleasure.

Ten minutes after she'd snuggled into bed with Sidney Sheldon's latest thriller, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. More astonishingly still was the fact that she never moved a muscle until the morning sun frosted her bedroom with soft white light.

She showered and dressed in brown pleated slacks, a cream-colored shirt, and a long tweed jacket. As a finishing touch she wore a brown felt Fedora, pulling it low on her forehead. She had no idea where she was going, but she couldn't wait to get there.

The living room was cluttered, but Holly cheerfully ignored the mess. It was Saturday. There would be plenty of time to do her house cleaning later. Right now she wanted juice and toast and a giant-sized bowl of Cheerios.

She had the Cheerios out of the cupboard before she noticed the man asleep on her kitchen table. Startled, she gave a muffled shriek and dropped the cereal box.

Thomas raised his head in painful slow motion, trying to focus. "You're wearing a hat," he said, every vowel and consonant slurred with fatigue. "Looks nice." He smiled and dropped his head back to

his arms.

"Thomas?" Then quite loudly: "Thomas!"

"There's no need to shout," he said, his voice muffled by the tabletop. "I'm awake. I've been awake all night."

"What're you doing here?" Holly went down on her hands and knees, chasing Cheerios. "Why didn't I hear you come in?"

"I'll tell you why." With great effort, Thomas assumed an upright position, meeting Holly's eyes with an accusing, bleary-eyed glare. "You didn't hear me because you were off in dreamland. Sawing logs. Unconscious. Sound asleep. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you. At first I thought you were dead. I even checked your pulse."

Holly rose slowly to her feet, holding the cereal box against her chest. "You were in my bedroom?" She didn't much like the idea of Thomas watching her sleep.

"Do you have any idea how lonely I felt when I realized you were actually sleeping? How could you do that to me? Five o'clock in the morning and no one to talk to."

Holly pulled up a chair at the table, patting Thomas's arm sympathetically. "It must have been frustrating for you."

"Tell me something, Holly dear. How could you let me walk into that lion's den last night?"

Holly took a large bite of an apple, wiping the juice from her chin. "Lion's den? I don't know what you're talking about."

"You knew Ruth was waiting for me in my apartment."

She nodded. "I believe I did."

"And you didn't tell me."

"What was I supposed to say? 'Excuse me, Mrs. Crockett, but Thomas already has a woman using his broiler.' You cooked your own goose when you gave Ruthless free run of your apartment."

"I didn't give her free run of my apartment," Thomas muttered. "She offered to pick up some laundry for me last week, so I gave her the key. Very innocent."

"Is that how it looked to your mother?" Holly asked cheerfully. "All very innocent? From what I saw of Ruth's evening gown—"

"You're enjoying this far too much," Thomas said, absently lifting his hand to her cheek. Slowly he let the back of his fingers brush the petal-smooth skin. "Do you know what? I don't want to talk about Ruth anymore."

Holly held on to him with wide, jewel-bright eyes. She felt that casual touch, felt the warm after-shocks deep in her body. Thomas was leaning toward her, his body relaxed, his eyes a soft, wild blue.

She stood up abruptly, her chair squealing on the tile floor. Her smile fought with the tense muscles in her jaw. "Do you know how late it is?" she asked. "I was going to get an early start this morning."

Thomas's wide mouth stretched in an engaging, familiar grin, and the sexual tension dissolved like magic. "This is fascinating. I've never seen you play at being a morning person. Where are you going?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I do know that I'm going to enjoy every second of this wonderful day."

"You know," Thomas said glumly; "you're almost repulsive when you've had a full night's sleep. So bouncy and cheerful, like a little Pollyanna. It's hard to take on an empty stomach."

"Do you know what you need?"

"What do I need?"

"You need to share my wonderful day. We'll pretend you slept like a baby all night long. We'll forget that nasty experience with Ruthless and Mommy Crockett. We'll fill you full of caffeine until you're positively buzzing with energy. We'll feed you a nice big bowl of Cheerios and I'll make it my personal mission to enter-

tain you today. It's the least I can do, after all the nights you've sat up with me. Is it a deal, Crockett?"

"It's a deal." Thomas gazed at her through sweetly drowsy lids, the very picture of relaxed indolence. Inside he was churning, trying to cope with emotions he could scarcely recognize. Instinct told him that peace of mind was a thing of the past.

He should have known. The very first time he saw her smile, he should have known.

Whether by accident or design, they found themselves having lunch in the seaside artists' colony of Sausalito. Once upon a summer, Holly had visited Sausalito with Jason. She had loved the bohemian atmosphere, the jumble of shops and galleries, the happy confusion. Jason had been uncomfortable. Holly had pressed him to wear Bermuda shorts, and Jason was never comfortable with his kneecaps showing.

Sausalito through Thomas Crockett's eyes was a different experience entirely. The unsettled weather discouraged naked kneecaps, but his baggy khaki slacks and white sweat shirt blended in beautifully with the casual atmosphere—a nice cross between tourist and local. Unlike Jason, who had bemoaned the absence of a four-star restaurant, Thomas was fascinated by the more unusual eating establishments. Greek shiskabob, vegetarian submarine sandwiches, cabbage strudel and cuck-a-tillas . . . whatever they might be.

They carted off an orgy of food and sat on a miniature plot of grass thirty feet from the ocean, Sausalito's official picnic ground. The wind was from the north and had a biting edge, prompting Holly to button her jacket and tug her hat down over her ears. Instinctively she huddled closer to Thomas.

"This little park is crawling with tour-

ists in the summer," she commented, leaning her cheek against his shoulder. "Jason said it gave him claustrophobia."

"You've been here with Jason?" Thomas stared over the ocean, the muscles suddenly tight in his chest. Either he was having a heart attack or the green-eyed monster was rearing its ugly head.

"Once," Holly said softly. "Almost three years ago. We stayed about forty-five minutes. Jason couldn't relax here. The atmosphere was too . . . relaxed. Do you know what I mean?"

"Not really." Thomas had never met Jason Passco, but he'd seen him several times on the evening news. "You don't have to talk about him if you don't want to," Thomas muttered. The topic of Jason Passco was as appealing to him as yam stew.

Holly shrugged with fair-minded indifference, drawing her legs up to her chest and looping her arms over her knees. "It doesn't bother me to talk about him. We had a lovely divorce, much nicer than the marriage. Jason was the ultimate perfectionist. He used to tell me that details were the spice of life. He couldn't walk through our living room without straightening the pictures on the wall."

"Was he kind to you?" Thomas asked softly. It might have seemed a strange question, but suddenly he needed to know.

Holly nodded slowly, her gaze fixed on the horizon. "Always. Our relationship was never painful. It was just . . . wrong." Then, in an abrupt change of subject that was typically Holly, she asked, "Why haven't you ever married, Thomas?"

"I suppose I've just been happy with the status quo. I haven't been particularly lonely or discontented. There weren't any gaping holes in my life I felt compelled to fill. What about you? Does the nasty old 'M' word scare you to death now?"

"Of course not: I told you, my short-

lived marriage wasn't exactly a nightmare . . . just a mistake. I have every intention of getting married again." She rested her chin on her knees, her expression bright and pensive. "As a matter of fact, I can tell you all about him. He'll be gentle, easy-going, patient . . . particularly patient. My domestic skills leave a bit to be desired, so he'll have to be patient. Also a heavy sleeper. Let's see, what else? Oh, yes . . . he'll never raise his voice to me. My mother and father have been happily married for thirty-seven years, and I've never heard my father raise his voice to my mother once."

Remembering the frequent occasions when Holly had more than carried her weight in a heated argument with him, Thomas said mildly, "I take it you didn't inherit this wonderful habit of remaining tranquil throughout life's little storms?"

"I told you he would have to be patient."

"And the ability to compromise? That must have skipped a generation, too."

She slanted him a warning look. "I believe I can compromise as well as the next person."

His wide mouth quirked. "Of course you can. And you never, ever throw things, do you McKenna?"

Trust him to bring that up. She had thrown a little tiny lamp at him when she discovered him happily ensconced in her living room reading her diary. "You deserved that," she said. "You know damn well that you shouldn't read someone's diary. It's an invasion of privacy. I'm just sorry I didn't hit you with that lamp."

"You didn't even come close," he said with infuriating smugness. "You couldn't hit the side of a barn with a snow plow. And I'll tell you something else. This morning while I was waiting for you to wake up, I read that entire diary from cover to cover."

"You what?"

"Every word." Watching the color suffuse her face, his eyes stretched in mock confusion. "Don't you want to discuss this calmly?"

Catching him off guard, she lunged, tumbling him on his back as her hands closed around his throat. She didn't actually intend to strangle him—she couldn't get a good enough grip—but the position was extremely satisfying. Her knees were on either side of his legs, pinning him to the grass. Shaking back her hair, she ground out, "Now would you like to discuss this calmly?"

Thomas nodded, his chest lifting with the rhythm of his laughter. "Yes. I didn't do it. I'm innocent." He walked his fingers slowly up her ribs, eensy-weensy-spider style. Holly gasped and started to wiggle. "What's the matter, McKenna? Hmm? Does that tickle?"

"Stop . . . that . . . Crockett!" Holly descended abruptly into a soft, giggling bundle on top of him. Her nose was pressed awkwardly against his neck, her elbows dug into the grass. "Don't tickle!"

Ordinarily Thomas Crockett didn't take orders from anyone. It occurred to him that it might be wise to make an exception this once. Holly was playing Twister all over his body as she strained to escape his hands. Her breasts were crushed against his chest, an erotic pressure that played merry hell with the light-hearted atmosphere. He stilled the movement of his hands just under her arms, the sides of her breasts searing his palms. Then he kissed her, deeply, sweetly. Afterwards, he moved away and closed his eyes briefly, taking a ragged, unsatisfying breath. There was a lack of oxygen in Sausalito. "I'll give you this much," he said huskily. "You know how to make a discussion interesting."

Holly lifted her head, the sting of fresh blood in her cheeks. She had tears in her eyes from the laughter, and her side hurt,

but she wasn't smiling any longer. She caught her breath as his knee lifted slowly between the warmth of her legs. The game had lost its innocence, and Holly was burning where their bodies touched, as if she had a fever.

She heard herself say, "It's getting late." Then, because she didn't know what else to do with this awkward moment, she rose to her feet, amazed that her afflicted legs could support her. "We probably should be getting back."

Thomas stood, giving her a quizzical half smile. Emotions came and went in his mind, feelings he didn't trust himself to put into words. He picked up her hat and plopped it down on her head. "You're right. It looks like it might rain."

Holly aged five years that night.

At least it looked like it, she thought wearily, staring at her reflection in the mirror the following morning. Her eyes were pure basset hound, red-rimmed and waterlogged. Her complexion was a unique shade of cottage cheese, highlighted by a thriving rash crawling up her neck to her chin. A rash, dammit.

So. There was a Jason rash—and there was this rash. Crockett-induced.

Holly stripped off her clothes and lay comatose in a tub of steaming water. She was exhausted. The old insomnia had kicked in again last night, keeping her pacing the floors until four o'clock that morning. She had finally fallen asleep at the kitchen table with her elbow in a Hostess cupcake.

Naturally she had plenty of quiet solitude for her soul-searching. Insomnia provided an overabundance of quiet solitude. She had relived that searing embrace with her strictly platonic neighbor more times than she could count.

She decided she needed a little time and distance to regain her emotional equilibrium. And since Thomas was just across the

hall, it seemed a good idea to run away from home. She dressed in a denim jumpsuit, and arranged her long hair in a fat braid over one shoulder. She didn't bother with makeup. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

Sunday morning quiet echoed through the old building. The elevator waited at the end of the hallway, but Holly took the stairs instead. At exactly nine-thirty a.m. she pulled her little red Fiero out of the parking lot, headed for a date with a hip-

Thomas knew Holly McKenna better than she knew herself—or so he thought. And faced with the brief but undeniably erotic experience of the day before, he imagined her first instinct would be to run. He telephoned her apartment at nine forty-five Sunday morning, hoping to catch her before she fled. He was too late.

He waited around his apartment the entire blessed day, occupying himself with fascinating domestic chores like pulling dead leaves off his philodendron and throwing moldy food out of the refrigerator. When he actually found himself watching a rerun of "Love Boat" that evening, he knew it was time to take a break. He went out for a sandwich at the corner deli, ran into a couple of friends from the office, and had a few beers. When he returned home, Holly's little sports car was in its usual parking space. There was a half-finished cone of cotton candy on the dashboard and a wilted helium balloon tied to the rearview mirror. The keys were still in the ignition, a typical Holly oversight. He opened the door and slipped them into his pocket, noting the telltale peanut shells that littered the floor mats. Of course. The zoo. It looked like Holly had had herself quite a day.

In the lobby he glanced at the elevator, then shook his head and jogged up the stairs to the fourth floor. Holly's door

opened just as he raised his hand to knock.

"Oh," Holly said. There was a child's sunburn on the tip of her nose and a smear of mustard on the collar of her jumpsuit.

"Oh yourself," Thomas said. "Can I come in?"

"I was just going down to my car," she said. "I think I left my keys in the—"

Thomas produced said keys, dangling them in the air. "Voila. I noticed them as I came in."

"Bad habits die hard," she murmured, catching the keys as he dropped them into her open palm. "Thanks for bringing them up."

"No problem." He waited for a moment, then asked with exaggerated patience, "May I please come in? I promise to mind my manners and keep my hands to myself, McKenna. I only want to talk."

"It's late," Holly said faintly, glancing at her watch. "It's nearly ten o'clock."

Thomas gave her a blistering smile. "And we insomniacs need our sleep, don't we, love?"

Holly matched his clear blue gaze. He wasn't going to make this easy, then. Well, what else was new? In a tone that would have given Emily Post nightmares she said, "Oh for heaven's sake, come in. Make yourself right at home."

"Thank you very much." Thomas strolled in, tugging gently on her braid as he passed her. "I came by to ask you a question. Would you like to go out tomorrow night?"

"Out?"

"You know, out. On a date." When she continued to stare at him, he prodded gently, "I'm asking for a date, McKenna. D-A-T-E. Just like every other mortal man who falls into your orbit."

"But you aren't like every other man." Holly's throat had grown painfully tight. "You're you. We're friends. We fight and yell and laugh and walk around in the middle of the night in our pajamas. It's won-

derful. 'I don't want it to change.'

"It doesn't have to change."

"But it could." She began to pace the room, twin spots of color burning high on her cheeks, golden braid swinging. "I'm not willing to take the chance."

"All right. If you won't go out with me tomorrow, what about sharing a platonic pizza? Your treat."

"I can't." She swallowed hard on nothing. "I have a date."

Patience, Thomas told himself. "I see. Who is the lucky man this time?"

"David. you remember him, he teaches—"

"—English lit. at Berkeley. I know."

"We're going to see the production of 'The Tempest' at the college," she went on, trying to discipline the trembling in her legs. She was blindingly conscious of the crystalline-blue eyes fixed on her with quiet intensity. "I invited him back here afterwards for dinner."

"And you're cooking?" he asked.

Holly bristled. "Yes, I'm cooking. Do you have a problem with that?"

"I don't." Thomas decided that it was time to leave. His patience was wearing thin. "Professor David might have a problem," he said, crossing to the door. "You're not the most consistent of cooks, McKenna. That pork loin roast you fed me nearly put me in the hospital."

"So it was a little underdone."

"It was still squealing," he said. "Think about ordering out, McKenna. The life you save might be your own . . . and good old David's, of course. Happy insomnia, sweetheart."

Holly stood at the window long after he left, wide-eyed and pensive. There was a chicken to be defrosted. Her nails needed to be done. She needed to iron a blouse for work the next morning. Still she stood, gazing at nothing, the rhythmic sound of her breathing occasionally breaking into odd little catches.

It was going to be another long night.

David loved her chicken.

He had three helpings, which was quite remarkable considering she had mistakenly used vinegar instead of wine in the sauce. Holly found herself wincing each time he took a bite, but he truly seemed to enjoy it. Likewise the soggy carrots and crispy wild rice.

"You're a wonderful cook," David said, putting his napkin on the table with a contented sigh. "I don't know when I've enjoyed a meal so much."

Holly wondered if his taste buds had somehow been damaged in a freak childhood accident. Still, it was nice to be appreciated.

"Would you like some dessert?" she asked, noting David's whistle-clean plate. "I made chocolate mousse." At least she hoped she did. She hadn't looked at it since she left it in the fridge that morning, and it wasn't too healthy then. "Or we could just have coffee?"

David's smile grew, etching a network of fine lines around those twinkling eyes. "Chocolate mousse . . . How did you know it was my favorite?"

"I'll just run in the kitchen and get it, then."

She hadn't taken three steps when a jaunty knock sounded at her front door. She knew that knock.

Thomas had one hip propped against the doorframe, an appealing figure in soft white denims and blue chambray. He smiled with dazzling innocence, dangling an empty measuring cup from two fingers.

"I need to borrow a cup of sugar," he said.

"It's nearly midnight," Holly reminded him stiffly, "and I have company."

"It won't take long." Thomas sailed past her, dropping a quick kiss on the top of her golden head.

The dining table was situated in such a way that Professor David was spared the sight. Pity. "I can't sleep, so I thought I'd whip up a batch of fudge."

Holly followed him helplessly into the living room. "You hate fudge," she said.

"Did I say fudge? I meant divinity." He walked over to the table with lazy grace, holding out his hand. "Thomas Crockett," he said. "I'm Holly's neighbor across the way."

David stood. "Nice to meet you." They shook hands.

"Sorry to interrupt your dinner," Thomas said, glancing at the serving dishes on the table. His brows drew together when he saw the burned rice, but he refrained from comment. He placed his hand on the small of Holly's back, urging her toward the kitchen. "If you'll just show me where you keep the sugar, I'll be out of your hair in no time. Excuse us, David."

Feeling the heat build beneath her skin, Holly allowed herself to be ushered through the swinging door into the kitchen. Without a word, she yanked the measuring cup from Thomas's hand and went straight for the sugar canister.

"You aren't in a good mood," Thomas observed mildly. "Did I interrupt a precious moment between the two of you?"

The sugar canister was empty. Holly slammed the lid down and went to the pantry and opened it. "Would it matter if you had? After all, you have this desperate sugar emergency."

"I knew you'd understand," Crockett murmured, watching her climb up on an aluminum stool to reach the top shelves. She was wearing a short skirt that exposed the tantalizing length of her legs. Watching her, his pulse began to pound. "You could break hearts in that outfit, McKenna. You probably had Professor David so overcome with your devastating charm that he never even noticed the rice."

Holly began tapping her sandal. "What

about the rice?"

Suddenly her sandal skidded sideways. Holly wobbled, catching the edge of the shelf in a white-knuckled grip. Before she could regain her balance, the footstool began to rock. "Thomas, catch me! Oh hell—the sugar!"

A ten-pound bag of sugar plummeted to the floor, hitting and splitting with a soft thump. Holly gave up her death grip on the shelf and pitched forward, coming down hard against Thomas's chest with the same soft thump. His arms tightened around her waist, her hands clung weakly to his shoulders, and her feet dangled five inches above the floor.

They stood that way, motionless, the old-fashioned wall clock softly ticking away the seconds. Then Holly was gently lowered until her feet touched the ground. She felt Thomas's hand stroke her back, moving from her shoulders to her hips, fingers knead in the gentle curve of her buttocks. She tipped back her head, gazing up at him through eyes that felt feverish and glazed.

When she spoke, her voice was strained. "Why did you come tonight?"

Thomas shook his head faintly. "I don't know." His mouth came down to hers in thick slow motion, his kiss stroking her lips gently. His touch was whisper-soft, his tongue gliding inward with gentle force. His hands brought her closer, tucking her into the warm cradle of his hips.

Someone was whistling in the living room. The sound penetrated the sensations flooding Holly's mind and body. Whistling. David.

She broke from the kiss, sex-flushed and breathless, her eyes mirroring her confusion. Bits and pieces of logic penetrated the erotic babble in her mind. There was sugar to be cleaned up. Chocolate mousse to serve.

And David. Waiting and whistling.

"I can't go out there," she whispered,

touching the back of her hand to her lips. "I look—"

"You look fine," Thomas said softly.

Holly picked up the measuring cup from the counter with shaking fingers. She scooped up a cup of sugar from the white drift on the floor. "This isn't exactly sanitary," she said tonelessly.

"No, but it's a nice prop." Thomas took the cup, his smile fighting the tense muscles in his jaw. "Think how simple life would be if you weren't so determined to fight me on this. I wouldn't have to make up excuses to interrupt your dates. You wouldn't waste sugar. Professor David wouldn't have to eat your rice. You can't ignore logic like that."

"Yes, I can."

"Did you know you had that rash on your neck again?"

She knew. She'd started itching in the pantry. "It's a virus. Would you please tell David I'll be out in a minute?"

Thomas sighed and turned away, preparing himself for yet another revolting display of chivalry. Holly's voice caught him at the door.

"Thomas?"

"What?"

"Why now? We've been the best of friends for months—why do you want to change things now?"

"You really don't know, do you?" A wry smile drifted like a shadow across his lips. "I fell in love with my best friend."

After David left, Holly turned on the television and sat in front of it for two solid hours, deaf, dumb, and blind to the flickering square of light. Her mind kept giving her images—blue, blue eyes filled with laughter and devilment.

Dry mouthed, glassy eyed, she turned off the television and walked to the bathroom. She dropped her clothes in a tumble on the floor and ran her bathwater.

Clean, dressed in a blue cotton night-

gown and smelling like a baby, a half-hour later, she sat in front of her dressing table, slowly brushing her freshly shampooed hair.

She stared at her reflected image in the mirror, dragging the brush through her hair with methodical even strokes. Her eyes were dark and lustrous, heavily shadowed with spiky-wet lashes. Her lips were slightly parted over shallow, unsatisfying breaths. Her gown clung damply to the upper swell of breasts, clearly revealing the frantic throbbing of her heart.

Thomas.

Moving in thick slow motion, she set the brush down gently on the table.

There were no words to describe Thomas's restlessness. He moved from room to room in his apartment, straightening things, displacing things. He tried to eat something, but found he had no appetite. He tried to work on the advertising campaign that was overdue, but his concentration was splintered. He thought about changing into sweats and taking a brisk run, but his body was curiously lethargic for such a restless soul. He felt like he was made of hot, heavy lead.

He showered and pulled on a thick terry robe. He shaved with a halfhearted attention that earned him a nick in his chin. He shook his hair dry, combing it with his fingers. He stared at his reflection in the steamy mirror for a still moment, his lips twisting an odd sort of smile. Could he possibly be as frustrated as he looked?

It was two-thirty when he heard the soft knock at his door. Once, twice.

There was an instant constriction in his throat, his chest. He walked slowly to the door, hesitating briefly before he opened it. Holly stood there in the shadows of the hallway, her hands curiously still at her sides. She wore a plain blue sleeveless nightgown. Her eyes were enormous in

her pale face, fixed on him with silent desperation.

He took her hand in his, leading her into the room, closing the door softly behind them. There was a single lamp burning on the end table near the sofa, casting a flickering pool of light into the dusky corners of the room. He could see the soft line of her thighs through the transparent material of her gown, the straining points of her nipples.

He spoke only once, touching the damp silk of her hair with a wondering hand. "Are you sure?"

Holly nodded, wetting dry lips with the tip of her tongue. "Yes. I need you." A pause, then in a whisper of sound: "And I love you."

Then they were in each other's arms, kissing with a barely restrained passion. His mouth moved over her face, her lips, her eyes, her throat. The kisses were swift and hard, sweet and lingering. Holly's response was instinctive and genuine, unfettered by doubt or hesitation. Every sense was attuned to him, and the demand she could feel from him. His hand slipped beneath the neckline of her nightgown, his thumb rubbing over the sensitized tip of her nipple. She couldn't stop the shudders that radiated deep within her.

He swept her up in his arms and carried her to the shadows of his bedroom, his pulse hard and exciting against her cheek. He laid her down on the puffy silk comforter, smoothing her tangled hair over the pillow before he stepped back. He shrugged out of the robe, dropping it on the floor. The movements were swift and spare. Watching him, Holly smiled.

He was beside her, whispering her name, taking her face in his hands and brushing a halo of kisses on her mouth. Holly's hips were writhing against him, beginning a primitive rhythm that she couldn't control.

"Not yet," he whispered, his eyes rap-

idly searching her face in the darkness. "I'm trying to give you time . . ."

Holly rose slowly to her knees, pulling the nightgown over her head and tossing it to the floor. "I don't want time," she said huskily, barely recognizing the deep, lyrical sound of her own voice.

She could feel the hard knots of tension in his muscles as he pulled her down to him. He stroked and kissed and touched every curve, every plane, every secret hollow of her body until she was sweat-dampened and shivering with reaction. He united them while her legs were wrapped around his back, her hands clinging fiercely to his shoulders, her head thrown back in the curtain of her hair. He swallowed her cry of pleasure with his mouth, staying with her while they began a feverish, soul-deep rhythm. Waves of sensation rose and rose and rose within her, making her wild, finally cresting and breaking in an explosion that never seemed to end . . .

In the days that followed, Thomas Crockett slept better than he ever had in his life. The last week had been a revelation. He learned what it was like to be a normal get-up-in-the-morning, go-to-bed-at-night kind of guy. He had boundless energy. His work was going well. He actually started exercising, running three miles before work every morning. Why had no one ever told him that the cure for insomnia was love?

As far as he could tell, Holly was enjoying the same new lease on life. He never heard her wandering around at night. There were no more impromptu card games or midnight cooking-baking binges. She went to sleep in his arms and she woke up in his arms. More often than not they spent the nights in her apartment. Thomas had learned that women like to be close to their closets.

On Saturday he celebrated their first-

week anniversary as a couple by taking Holly to Ghirardelli Square. The weather was beautiful, with clear skies and mild temperatures. Holly was also beautiful, dressed in a short denim skirt and a form-fitting yellow knit top. They held hands like teenagers, wandering through the sun-kissed maze of shops and restaurants. Holly seemed particularly fascinated by a shop offering one-of-a-kind handmade kites. As an anniversary present, Thomas bought her a silk-screened dragon kite with a fifty-foot tail. Yes, he would take her to the beach to fly it one afternoon. No, he did not wish to buy the kite that was built to resemble a thirty-foot high trout.

"I suppose I understand why you didn't want it," Holly said later as they lunched on soup and salad at an outdoor cafe. "It would make any future catches seem terribly small, wouldn't it?"

"Not my catches," Thomas said promptly.

"Your good looks are exceeded only by your ego," she murmured, sipping the last of her iced tea. Immediately the waiter was upon them, his tongue tripping over itself as he offered Holly another drink, more water, some coffee. He was a fresh-faced boy of perhaps seventeen years, obviously dazzled by Holly's sympathetic smile.

Thomas didn't like him. He thought the kid might drool in Holly's soup if he kept hanging around like that. And he sure as hell didn't like the way he kept looking at Holly's miniskirt. "No coffee," he said shortly. "Just the tab."

"You didn't have to be so abrupt," Holly said when the waiter had gone. "He was only being friendly."

"I noticed," Thomas drawled. "He was being exceptionally friendly. Do you ever get tired of being fawned over?"

Holly held his gaze for a moment, then looked down at her plate. "He's just a

teenager. Are you sure you don't want any dessert?"

"No, I'm fine. Where to next?"

"Wherever. You choose, this is your party." Holly smiled, though it was something of an effort. She hadn't slept well lately and she was feeling the strain. The bright blue sky hurt her eyes.

She was more than a little irritated with Thomas's attitude toward their young waiter, though she was careful not to show it. The last thing she wanted today was an argument, particularly when her nerves were on edge from sheer exhaustion. For Thomas, she wanted today to be perfect.

They walked to the south end of the square where street musicians and mimes were entertaining the crowds. Holly became caught up in one young man's pantomime of setting out an imaginary picnic. He noticed her laughing at his antics and led her from the audience to sit and share his "lunch." He offered her imaginary watermelon. He picked her an imaginary flower. He pretended to weep when Thomas tossed him a dollar and took Holly away. Given a choice, Holly would have liked to stay and watch the rest of the performance. Judging by the way Thomas was glaring at the mime, she wasn't going to be given that choice.

Her first instinct was to dig in her heels. She didn't appreciate Thomas herding her through Ghirardelli Square like a well-trained sheepdog. Then she took a deep breath and told herself she was being overly sensitive. She was simply tired. Every night during the past week she'd left Thomas in bed sleeping like a baby and tiptoed restlessly through the apartment. Usually she spent a few minutes writing in her diary. Sometimes she watched television with the volume turned off, practicing the frustrating art of lip-reading. Night after night she slipped into the extraordinarily difficult role of the Polite Insomniac.

As far as she knew, Thomas wasn't aware of her sleepless nights. She always made sure she was back in bed when he woke up. She didn't want him to feel guilty simply because he'd managed to sleep through the night like a normal human being.

And so she acquiesced, meekly allowing Thomas to lead her up yet another flight of stairs and into another maze of little shops. By the time they left Ghirardelli Square, her head was aching and her knees were threatening mutiny. She was noticeably silent on the drive home, concentrating on remaining upright in her seat.

"I know why you're so quiet," Thomas said suddenly. "I've been acting like a possessive jerk all afternoon. Every time I saw a man looking at you, my temperature went up another ten degrees. I'm amazed that you didn't wrap that kite of yours around my neck. The old Holly certainly would have."

"What do you mean, the old Holly?"

"You've just been amazingly . . . patient lately. I deserved a kick in the shins a couple of times today. Or at the very least"—he smiled and touched the tip of her nose with his fingers—"a lamp thrown at my head."

A tiny inward voice—it may have been the "old" Holly—whispered, You'd better believe it, bub. But the smile she gave him was carefully arranged to reveal none of her pent-up frustration. "I had a wonderful day, Thomas. I don't feel the slightest urge to throw anything at you."

Back in her apartment, Holly went straight for the kitchen and preheated the oven. She had a casserole ready and a fruit salad in the refrigerator. She was setting the table when Thomas appeared in the doorway, looking faintly puzzled. "I've been trying to figure out what's different about your apartment," he said. "I've finally put my finger on it. It's clean."

Holly continued setting the table, her lips drawn tightly together. She had been turning herself inside out to keep her apartment immaculate, and he just noticed it tonight? "Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes," she said.

"Would you like to talk?" he said softly, noticing her tense face.

Holly turned her head to look at him. "What about?"

"Oh, this and that." Thomas nodded toward the picture-perfect table. "Your Betty Crocker virus, for one thing. I kind of get the feeling that I'm responsible."

Holly didn't know what caused her to snap. She didn't care. She felt like a jar of boiling jelly that had just exploded in the canning bath.

"A Betty Crocker virus?" she choked out, holding him in a dangerous gaze. "don't you like our cozy little supper, Thomas? I can fix that . . . watch!" It felt wonderful, absolutely wonderful to jerk the tablecloth off the table, flinging dishes and silverware to all corners of the room. The unbreakable plates stayed intact. The glassware didn't. "There. Does this look more homey to you, more lived in?"

"Holly, what the hell has—"

"We need popcorn," she said suddenly. "The living room should smell like popcorn. We have some left over from last night." Tripping across broken glass in her sandals, she grabbed a half-full bowl of popcorn off the counter. "Here we go. This will give the apartment that lived-in look you love."

Thomas tried to grab the bowl but she ducked beneath his arm. She ran into the living room scattering popcorn right and left. Thomas followed behind, dazed, angry, bewildered. "What are you trying to prove? What the hell is the matter with you?"

Holly wasn't listening.

She took care of the bathroom in thirty seconds flat. Toothpaste smeared on the

mirror. Scouring powder sprinkled on the drain. She grabbed a can of floral air freshener and soaked Thomas's shirt before he wrestled it away. "There. Now you won't be able to smell that nasty old Lysol any longer. Now we can settle down and have a nice relaxing evening at home." She heard the doorbell and her eyes brightened. "Oh, goody. Company."

"Don't answer it," Thomas said darkly. "It's probably the police."

She walked across the living room, the soles of her shoes crunching on popcorn. The doorbell sounded again.

"Keep your shorts on," Holly called, swinging the door wide.

Her first thought was a deep and abiding regret that she had made that comment about shorts. She wouldn't have, had she known Thomas's mother was standing outside her door.

"Mrs. Crockett," Holly said woodenly. "How lovely to see you again."

Leigh Crockett was smiling faintly, staring at her with Thomas's startlingly blue eyes. Her dusty-rose suit matched her hat, her shoes, and Holly's burning cheeks. "Good evening, dear," she said politely. "I hope I'm not disturbing you, but I seem to have . . . misplaced my absentminded son. We had a date today. His door is unlocked, there are dirty dishes in the sink, but no Thomas. I was wondering if you might have seen—" Her eyes flickered over Holly's shoulder, widening slightly as they rested on her absentminded son standing in the living room.

"Hi, Mom," Thomas said.

"Hello, Thomas," Mrs. Crockett said.

Holly's though processes were stymied, leaving her instincts to take over. She said stoically, "Won't you come in, Mrs. Crockett?" She could have cried when the older woman nodded.

Although Mrs. Crockett tried to pick her way carefully across the carpet, a certain amount of popcorn crunching was in-

evitable. Thomas used the time wisely, shoving cushions helter-skelter back on the sofa. He sat down on the left of his mother, Holly on the right.

"As you can see, Thomas," Mrs. Crockett said mildly, "we have returned from our trip to Geneva."

Thomas nodded, keeping one eye on Holly's cardboard profile. "I can see that, Mom."

"I was under the impression we were getting together today," she went on, folding her hands neatly on top of the clutch purse in her lap. "Perhaps I had my dates confused."

Thomas sighed. "More than likely your son was confused. I'm sorry, really I am. I completely forgot."

"These things happen," Mrs. Crockett replied. The look she gave her son said, often.

There was a short silence.

Mrs. Crockett turned to Holly with a sympathetic smile. "Tell me, dear . . . is he always this unpredictable around you? It must be very frightening."

Holly looked from Thomas's blue, blue eyes to his mother's. There was something caught in her throat, something huge and jagged and painful. She couldn't talk. She couldn't even nod. Her field of vision was suddenly flooded with tears. She pressed a fist to her mouth to stifle a choked sob, then realized with a vague disgust that she was going to cry. She jumped up and ran blindly out of the room, her posture desolate and panicked.

Thomas was stunned. He winced as he listened to the bedroom door slam shut. Instinctively he half rose to go to her, but was stopped by his mother's hand on his arm.

"I don't think so," she said softly.

"You don't understand—"

"You're right." Her expression was serene. "I don't understand, but I recognize the look on Holly's face. She needs a bit of

time to herself. You can give her that much."

"She spilled some popcorn," Thomas said, feeling some explanation was necessary.

"I can see that, darling. Well, I won't keep you any longer." She stood, smoothing her pink linen skirt. "I forgive you for standing me up today. I can see that you had an excellent excuse, and it makes me very happy."

Thomas trailed after her, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his jeans. "Yes? What excuse is that?"

"Never mind, dear. I don't want to make assumptions about your personal life." She paused at the door and a sudden smile swept over her face. "She's a beautiful girl, Thomas. I hope the children take after her. I'll call you next week. Good night."

Thomas closed the door behind her, then turned and slumped against it, surveying the damage area through half-closed lids. The lady had managed to cover a lot of ground in a few short minutes.

He went to the kitchen, cleaning up the broken glass and pulling a charred casserole from the oven. Back in the living room he rearranged the cushions on the sofa and began picking up the books Holly had pulled from the bookshelves. He smiled faintly as he noticed her old diary on the carpet beneath the coffee table. It was one of those little pink jobs with a gold lock that was broken. He picked it up and it fell open to a new entry, dated a week earlier.

He shouldn't read it, he thought. Well, perhaps just one or two little paragraphs, in the interest of better communication.

Sunday, May 1st

Thomas is sleeping. I'm drifting around the house like a ghost in the dark. I'm afraid I'm going to disturb him. I hesitate to watch television, hesitate to turn on

the bath, hesitate to rummage in the kitchen. I hesitate, period. I keep thinking if I make a mistake, it could all go to pieces in my hands. No slips this time.

Wednesday, May 4th

Watched I Was A Teenage Werewolf on Nightowl Theater without a sound. Thomas would have enjoyed it.

I came home early from work today to clean the house. I would have rather gone to the park and fed the ducks leftover meat loaf. It was a beautiful day.

I wish Thomas would wake up.

Friday May 6th

Deja vu. When I was married, I spent half my life wandering around in the dark trying not to disturb Jason. It's not healthy to spend half your life in the dark.

The old mistakes are playing in my head, over and over and over. I'm constantly looking ahead, trying to anticipate anything that might disillusion him. It's like trying to walk down the sidewalk without stepping on any cracks.

I'm pretending again. I told him I slept well last night.

I love him.

Thomas closed the book and replaced it in the shelves. He ran his index finger slowly along the binding, as if it were the most important thing he had ever done in his life. He understood now. She was still caught in a circle of hurt and misunderstanding. His girl was a bloody marvel, yet here she was hiding her true colors for fear they might be too bright, or dreary or pale. Apparently Jason had taught her that love was conditional. In his case, it had been. He had asked her to give herself up, to believe as he believed, to be what he wanted her to be, or he wouldn't be able to love her.

Thomas Jedediah Crockett was cast in a different mold. And come hell or high wa-

ter, he was going to make this right for her. In her diary, Holly had talked about loving him. She had never mentioned being loved in return. It was a catch-22. She couldn't recognize the priceless and unique person she was as long as her actions were motivated by fear, obligation, or guilt. And until she accepted her own feelings—sometimes frightened, sometimes passionate and vulnerable, occasionally wild and exciting—she would never be able to trust in his feelings for her.

The sun was shining. Her house was clean. Thomas was nowhere to be found.

Holly walked slowly from room to room, knuckling her sleepy eyes and stretching stiff muscles. No toothpaste on the mirror. No broken glass in the kitchen. No popcorn on the living room carpet. She hoped fervently that Mrs. Crockett had not been the one who cleaned up after Hurricane Holly. She didn't look like the kind of woman who tied a dish towel around her waist and cleaned other people's houses, but one never knew.

Holly took a shower, regretting every moment of last night. She'd simply have to apologize, that was all; Thomas would understand.

She dried herself off and dressed in a sweatsuit. Body and soul revived, she picked up the telephone and dialed Thomas's number. There was no answer. Holly tried again, letting it ring a dozen times before finally replacing the receiver. Before her mind could actually grasp the nasty possibilities—Ruth Reynolds at the core of every one—there was a blessedly familiar knock at the door.

Thomas was wearing a white T-shirt and black sweat pants. His feet were bare, his hair silky soft and disheveled.

"Hi," he said softly.

Holly's smile stretched; so did his.

"Hi," she said. "Thanks for cleaning up

the apartment. And sorry for the outburst."

"No problem. My mother was charmed by you, anyway."

It was almost like old times. They sat cross-legged on the living room carpet, each of them fresh from the shower and smelling of soap.

"I have a confession to make, Holly. Last night after you'd gone to bed, I read your diary."

"You didn't. Dammit Crockett, not again."

"Yes, again. I read every entry you made over the past few days. You can start tossing lamps at me if you want to, but I'm not sorry I did it. It helped me to finally understand how hard this has all been for you. I pushed you into a physical relationship you weren't ready for. I should have let you take things at your own pace."

"You should have kept your nose out of my diary."

He sighed and placed his hands on her shoulders, the gesture deliberately asexual. "Sweet McKenna, we're turning back the clock. I'm going to give you the time I should have given you before. From now on, we're back to square one. You don't need to pace the floors at night or fix me healthy casseroles using the five main food groups. We're friends, buddies, partners in insomnia. I won't push for anything more . . . not until you can love me without losing yourself in the process."

Holly stared at him. "Is this little talk supposed to make me feel better or worse?"

"It's supposed to put your mind at ease."

What about my body? "I'm not sure what to say. 'Thank you' doesn't seem quite appropriate."

Thomas stood up abruptly, giving her a lopsided grin. "How about a game of Scrabble?"

"I'm really not in the mood." Holly got

to her feet.

He looked at her for a long moment, his eyes searching, probing into her soul layer by layer. There was the faintest tightening of his features, then he smiled reassuringly. "Tossing me out on my ear, are you?"

"I have a lot of work to catch up on today for an early meeting tomorrow," Holly said. And if she was the one tossing him out on his ear, why did she feel so abandoned?

"Right." He walked to the door, whispering softly beneath his breath. "See you later then, buddy."

Holly kicked the door after he closed it in response.

She wasn't in the most pleasant frame of mind when she went to work the next morning. Several times she caught Zack staring at her in that speculative way he had when he was trying to figure out if he was dealing with a hormonal woman or not. "Would you stop staring at me?" she snapped finally, throwing a pencil at him. "Yes, I'm in a lousy mood; no, it isn't hormones. I have a very good reason for feeling like this."

"Which is?" Zack asked mildly.

Sexual frustration and emotional confusion. Neither of which she felt like admitting. "I had a bad night. I'm tired."

Zack leaned back in his chair, hooking his hands behind his neck. "Now, why don't you tell Uncle Zack what's bothering you? I'm a very good listener. Come on, speak up."

"It's not that easy."

"What's his name?" Zack pressed.

"Thomas."

"So how do you feel about him?"

"I like him," Holly whispered. Then in a breathless rush: "As a matter of fact, I've been in love with him for months, but I didn't know it until just lately. And for a while everything was fine, except that I was always cleaning my apartment and I

couldn't sleep and I was always worrying that I would disappoint him the way I did Jason. And then I kind of blew up and threw things and was rude to his mother—who didn't deserve it because she's a lovely lady. So he decided that the pressure was too much for me, and he was afraid that I was going to try so hard to make him happy that I lost myself, just like when I was married. So now he wants to be platonic friends like we were in the beginning, while I put my mind at ease. And I guess that's about it."

Zack whistled softly. "Boy, when you spill your guts, you really spill your guts."

"You asked."

"Let me get this straight. You love him and he loves you. Right?" Holly nodded. "And you couldn't handle the relationship in the beginning because you were trying to please him instead of yourself?"

"I suppose so."

"But now you know what you want." He cocked one eyebrow at her. "Right?"

"I know what I wanted yesterday," Holly said darkly. "I wanted to tell him I wasn't interested in this nifty little plan of his to turn back the clock and play best buddies again."

"So why didn't you?"

Holly shrugged. "I didn't think it was what he wanted."

"I shall never understand the circuitous workings of the female mind." Zack regarded her sternly over the rim of his glasses. "It seems to me that Thomas is more interested in what *you* want. Unfortunately, he'll never know as long as you're tying yourself in knots trying to second-guess *him*. Am I making myself clear?"

"I'm beginning to get the picture," Holly said slowly.

"It's simple. Yesterday you suppressed your real feelings and today you're miserable. Not to mention the fact that you probably disappointed Thomas when you

still couldn't bring yourself to open up with him."

"I was just trying —"

"—to make him happy. I know. And the only way you're ever going to do that is by making yourself happy. I know it sounds illogical, but that's the way love works. Be yourself, Holly. The rest will come."

Holly was silent for a moment, chewing on a ragged fingernail. "Is it really that simple?"

"I know simplicity goes against a woman's grain, but—yes. It's really that simple."

"But what do I do now?"

He smiled. "Exactly what you want to do."

Thomas was late getting home from work that night. It had been one of those ho-hum days when nothing really went wrong, but nothing actually felt right.

In his apartment he stripped off his tie, always the first thing to go. Useless articles of clothing, hanging there around your neck and always dangling in your soup. Whoever invented ties ought to be shot.

Granted, he wasn't in the best of moods. He'd had a bad night. He hadn't slept much, and when he did sleep, he dreamed of Holly. He hated waking up without her beside him.

His mother telephoned just as he was getting into the shower.

"Well?" she asked cheerfully. "Have you any news for me?"

"What kind of news, Mom?"

"Births, deaths. . . . engagements. That sort of news."

"No."

"You're not getting any younger, Thomas. Your biological time clock is ticking away. If you wait much longer, my having grandchildren may just be an impossible dream."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Don't swear at your mother, Thomas. Your father and I are going to the beach house in Laguna. If you have any news—"

"I know where to find you. Bye, Mom."

The telephone rang again just as he was getting out of the shower. He wrapped a towel around his waist, dripping puddles into the bedroom.

"Thomas?"

Holly. Thomas smiled for the first time in hours. "Hey, stranger. Nice to hear from you."

"Thomas, I have a favor to ask you. Could you come over and look at the sink in my bathroom? It's clogged again."

"Sure." It was just one of those days, Thomas thought, when fate liked to play nasty tricks. "I'll be over in ten minutes."

"I have to run my rent check downstairs. If I'm not here, just come in. Bye."

Thomas pulled on his plumbing clothes, a paint-spotted sweat shirt and threadbare jeans. Armed with his plumbing tools—a toilet plunger and a can of Drano—he walked over to Holly's apartment. When she didn't answer his knock, he went in, only to find the bathroom sink perfectly clear. Holly's diary was open on the tile counter.

Obviously she wanted him to read it. So he did.

Monday, May 9th

I'm terribly depressed. Thomas Crockett, the true love of my life, has seduced and abandoned me. There is nothing left for me in this life. I believe I will go up to the roof and jump off. That is, unless the true love of my life comes and convinces me that I won't have to sleep alone anymore.

Hurry, Thomas.

Thomas did as he was told. Not because

he was afraid Holly was teetering on the edge of the roof, but because he couldn't wait to get her in his arms. The lady sounded like she knew exactly what she wanted. Finally.

The roof was illuminated only by stars and the spent light drifting over from a nearby streetlamp. Holly McKenna was sitting on a blanket in the center of this shadowy stage. She was wearing her fluffy pink robe and a brilliant smile. There was a bottle of sparkling grape juice nearby—Thomas's favorite—and two long-stemmed glasses. This didn't look like a woman about to commit a desperate act.

"You called," Thomas said, eating her with his eyes.

"And you read my diary again." Holly shook her head. "Shame on you, Thomas. When are you going to learn to respect my privacy?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

Starlight lingered in the depths of her eyes. "Did you come to save me?"

He sat down beside her, his hair drinking in the starlight, his thigh brushing against hers. "I came to save you."

"Good," she whispered. "I need saving, Thomas." She leaned over and touched her lips to his with fierce brevity. "I need you. Do you know what I have on under this robe? Absolutely nothing." She pulled it open and showed him. "It was nice and warm while I waited for you. Now I'm kind of hot. Have you ever made love on a roof?"

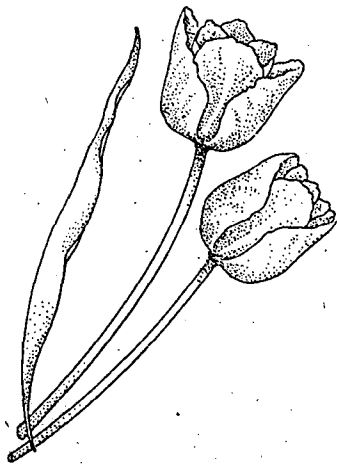
Thomas's heart was in his throat . . . and his eyes. "No. Not even once, McKenna."

"Neither have I," she confided. "But I'm going to. From this day on, I'm going to do every lovely, wonderful, exciting thing that I can think of . . . and I'm going to do them all with you." She paused, then added thoughtfully, "Or to you."

"I think I'm the one that needs saving," Thomas muttered hoarsely.

Holly smiled and slipped the robe off her shoulders, feeling the night air whispering over her skin. "Then I'll save you. I'll save you better than you have ever been saved before . . ."

It was much later when Thomas whispered, "Remind me to call my mother tomorrow." ♥





Moonshine and Madness

If her father hadn't been arrested for making and then skipping bail, if his father hadn't been the bail bondsman and too sick to get his man - Sarah Branscum and Allen Ames would never have met or fallen in love . . . or been in such trouble!

KATE GILBERT

From MOONSHINE AND MADNESS by Kate Gilbert. Copyright © 1987 by Kate Gilbert. Published by permission of The Berkley Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Sarah Branscum sat hunched over the cluttered table, a fine sable-hair paintbrush poised over the pale blue of a bird that seemed about to fly off the paper. This bird was part of a commission job for a bank in Fayetteville, and if she could complete it to the customer's satisfaction before her sabbatical ended, she'd be on her way to becoming self-supporting as a painter and could give up her job teaching art at the Harrison Community College.

Just as the brush touched the paper, the

sound of the phone shattered the morning silence. As she picked up the offending instrument, she stretched and ran a hand through her long golden curls. "Hello?"

The loud, nasal voice forced Sarah to hold the phone away from her ear. "Sarruth, you've got to come home right now, and I mean right now."

The "Sarruth" grated on Sarah's nerves. Her relatives insisted on slurring Sarah Ruth into one name. "What is it, Aunt Beulah?"

"Your daddy's makin' moonshine again, and he's been arrested. You gotta talk some sense into him."

Sarah slumped into a chair, her deep blue eyes closing. "Please tell me you're kidding, Aunt Beulah."

"Sarruth, you know I wouldn't kid about a thing like this. Now, he's your daddy. And you know he just ain't been quite right since he lost Adele last year."

Sarah's immediate reaction was that he'd never been quite right, but that thought was eclipsed by the wave of pain she still felt at the mention of her mother's name. "Aunt Beulah, he can just stay in jail if he's been making whiskey again." Then her conflicting feelings made her soften. "If he needs money, I'll send it."

"We already bailed him out. And it cost us an arm and a leg, but he's likely to take off. Besides, you owe your mama, may she rest in peace. She counted on you to keep him straight."

That was the last blow to Sarah's defenses. "All right, I'll be home sometime today. As soon as I can."

"I'll be waitin' for you, Sarruth."

Sarah hung up and sat for a long moment. She hadn't been in the house since her mother died, and she wasn't sure she could face it. But she didn't have any choice.

Allen Ames slammed down the phone, rose, and headed for his car, ignoring the pile of sales contracts and construction bids scattered across his gleaming walnut desk. The lack of answer to his repeated phone calls meant that Eugene Branscum had probably skipped bail. And that meant Allen would have to go find him. He hated it; he hated every aspect of his forced entry into the world of bail bondsmen. He much preferred his own business, real estate, and fervently hoped that his father, Gilbert, would make a speedy recovery from his heart attack and take his

thankless business back.

Sighing, Allen picked up Branscum's file and stepped out into the bright spring morning. He smiled at the memory of his father's excitement over the arrest of a real moonshiner.

Only in the mountains, he thought as he drove out of Harrison and headed south. Judging from the address, the Branscum homestead was in the middle of nowhere and would probably take the rest of the day to find. But Gilbert would want a full report on his investment. The bond had been ten thousand dollars, which meant some relative of Eugene Branscum's had put up ten percent of the total bond to Gilbert, and Gilbert had guaranteed the rest of the bond to the court. If the old man didn't show, Gilbert would have to cough up the entire ten thousand. Allen knew that even the thought of that would give his father another coronary.

Sarah warmed up the car and headed south, wondering angrily yet again why her father couldn't just retire and fish or hunt like other fathers. But then, from Sarah's perspective, he'd always been retired. Eugene, like many other mountain men, had raised strawberries, traded things, cut firewood in the winter, and baled hay for people in the summer. Sarah had never lacked for anything she needed, but somewhere along the way, she had decided people were supposed to have regular jobs—particularly men with families.

As she turned off the highway, she noted gratefully that the national park campground that adjoined Eugene's land was deserted. Too early for campers. At least she wouldn't have to deal with any neighbors. She pulled into the yard just in time to see her errant father loading something into his pickup truck.

Eugene's weathered face wrinkled into a smile when she got out of the car. "Sarruth, honey, what in the world are you

doin' home?"

Sarah looked at the old man, finding it hard to believe he'd aged so much in the past year. He had been nearly forty when Sarah was born, and she was almost thirty-five now. She realized with a start that he was seventy-five and quickly pushed the thought aside.

"More to the point, Eugene, what are you doing?" She hadn't called him Daddy in a long time.

He gave her a shrewd look. "I guess that blasted Beulah called you, didn't she?"

Sarah chewed on her lip. "Eugene, were you really arrested for making moonshine?"

"The only reason they pulled me in was 'cause of that new sheriff. I wouldn't pay him enough, I reckon. I offered him twenty percent more'n we paid in the old days, and that's enough for any man."

Sarah looked at her father incredulously. "Eugene, did it ever occur to you that maybe he doesn't take bribes?"

"I swear, Sarruth, you been in the city too long. You gonna be here awhile? Sorry I can't stay." He moved toward her and raised a hand as if to touch her face. "You remind me so of my Adele."

For a moment, Sarah saw, the handsome young man who'd swept her mother off her feet all those years ago. Then his words sank in. "Where do you think you're going?"

He climbed into the cab of the truck. "To the woods to tend my still, honey, where else? I know Adele wouldn't approve, but she'd understand." His face softened. "I don't guess you ever understood what we had, did you, honey?"

That, Sarah thought, just might be the understatement of the century. A part of her wanted to take him into the house, get things straightened out. She leaned toward him, and then the enormity of what he was doing hit her. "You can't jump bail. You've got to . . ." The roar of the

engine drowned out the rest of the sentence.

"Feed Clyde, honey," Eugene yelled as the truck roared out of the drive.

"Clyde? Who the hell is Clyde?" she screamed after the disappearing truck. Sarah slammed into the house, then froze in her tracks. The place was a wreck. Clothes were strewn everywhere; cups and glasses holding questionable residues sat on every flat surface. Clyde must be some giant fungus growing in a corner, she thought, shuddering. She was sure the room hadn't been touched in a year.

She delivered a petulant kick to the couch and almost went back to her car to head for civilization and sanity. Instead, she stomped on into the kitchen and pulled the mop and broom out of the cupboard. Her eyes softened when she saw her mother's old apron hanging from a nail.

Donning the apron, she started in the living room. As she was clearing things off the ancient sofa, she came across a moth-eaten fur pillow. She was about to pick it up when the thing moved, causing Sarah to take a hasty step backward. When it sat up, she realized it was a cat—an old, war-scarred tomcat. Its fur was a washed-out yellow, its ears notched and ragged.

"Clyde, I presume." The cat stared at her with sleepy yellow eyes, then collapsed into its former posture. Just then Sarah heard a car in the drive. Peeking out through the dinghy curtains, she watched a man get out. Her artist's eye blinked as she took in the sharply creased navy pants encasing long, strong-looking legs. He had unruly black hair peppered at the temples with gray. She couldn't tell the color of his eyes, but she suspected they would be as black as his hair. He appeared to be frowning.

Forgetting her dirt-streaked face and the grimy condition of her clothes, she opened the door to find herself looking up

into a pair of eyes the color of a raven's wing. And beneath those raven eyes, the stern mouth had curved into a grin. Sarah's heart started to thump.

"Ms. Branscum?" He watched her nod. "I'm Allen Ames." When he got no reaction, he moved closer to look through the rusting screen, staring into deep blue eyes. He continued, "The bondsman who bailed Mr. Branscum out. I wondered if I could talk to him."

His voice mesmerized her almost as much as his eyes, but the mention of bail abruptly broke the link. The most beautiful man she'd ever seen, and he was here to take her father back to jail! In an instant, and not really understanding why, Sarah decided to play the part of the hill-billy she knew she must look. If he thought he was dealing with an ignorant mountain woman, maybe he would go away.

Grinning, she closed off her nasal passages, hoping that would produce the right amount of nasal twang. "He ain't here and I ain't got no idea where he's got off to." She watched his cocky grin freeze in shock.

Allen tried to remember the names on the bail contract so he could figure out who this woman was, all the time keeping his charming smile going. Instinct told him that something wasn't right. "Are you sure he hasn't taken a little, uh, vacation?" His mind pulled up a name: Sarah Branscum, daughter. What the hell had her occupation been? No frowzy housekeeper, he was sure.

Sarah shook her head furiously. "He's just out."

Allen took a step closer to the screen door. "I guess you don't have any idea where he might be out to?" He put a hand on the handle of the door and smiled, wanting a closer look at this woman who he was sure wasn't what she seemed to be. "I really need to ask you a few questions

for my records."

Sarah's heart pounded. Maybe she didn't owe Eugene, but she owed her mother, and if she kept looking at that handsome face, she'd probably spill the beans. "Wraht me a letter." With that, she backed away and shut the door in his face. She tried to slow her racing mind and pulse, wondering, as the moments passed, why the damn car hadn't left.

She peeked through the curtains. He was sitting in the car frowning and reading something. Sarah watched Allen get out of his car and head back up the steps. Her heart pounded faster as she saw the look on his face—a combination of determination and shrewdness that told her the jig was up. She opened the door before he got to the top step.

"Whatcha want? I tole ya, he ain't here. You jest get on outta here."

Allen grinned. He had to admire her spunk and her dialect, even if he didn't understand the why of it. She sounded just as if she'd never been off the mountain. "You are Sarah Branscum, aren't you?"

"What's it to you?" Sarah had no idea why she kept digging the hole deeper.

"You teach art?" He watched a red flush start.

"Do I look like I teacht anythin'?"

"No, not really, but that's what my records say."

"Well, maybe yur records is wrong." She noted with satisfaction that he was no longer so sure of himself.

"Somehow, I don't think Eugene Branscum has a cleaning lady." His eyes wandered over her grimy clothing. "Sarah, I don't know what your game is, but I do know who you are. And I will be back. We really do need to talk about your father."

"Ain't got nothin' to say."

Allen took a deep breath, pushing his irritation aside. "Right. Well, we'll see, won't we?" He turned and went down the

steps two at a time, not sure why he was so annoyed with her. He started the car and fishtailed the big Mercury out of the drive. As he headed back to town, he decided that Sarah Branscum would bear further investigation. And, curiously enough, he was looking forward to the task.

Sarah watched the car leave and heaved a sigh of relief. She threw herself back into her cleaning, trying to erase the image of burning black eyes. But those eyes seemed to haunt Sarah with the possibility that she would never again have someone to share her life with. She'd never been very good at dealing with men, and after the fiasco with Rick, she'd decided it just didn't seem worth the effort.

She finally called her aunt, putting off Beulah's impending visit with a promise to see her first thing in the morning. After a quick sandwich for dinner, Sarah curled up in bed with a mystery, but her mind raced between the problem of what to do about her father and the problem of what to do about the man who had come for her father. In spite of the cool night, she threw back the covers, finally falling into a restless sleep filled with visions of raven eyes that seemed to follow her.

She awoke shortly after daylight. Knowing that Beulah would have coffee made at her place, Sarah dressed hurriedly, feeling a sudden need to be with another human being.

Beulah was busily cleaning house when Sarah arrived. Since Beulah's husband, Clarence, was not in evidence, Sarah assumed he had already gone down to the little store for his morning gossip with the other old men. Gratefully accepting a cup of strong black coffee, Sarah began to feel more like her old self, chuckling at her memories of the woman now sitting across the table.

"Sarruth, have you talked to Eugene

about this mess?"

"Well, he's thinking about his situation, Aunt Beulah. I think he'll be just fine. When is the hearing?"

"Next month." Beulah's hawk eyes stared at her niece across the table, and Sarah felt like a child again. "You think he'll be just fine? Well, let me tell you somethin', Sarruth. Don't you let him outta your sight for a minute. 'Cause if you do, he'll take off for the woods, and that's the last we'll see o' him. He was a moonshiner when your mama met him, and they always go back to their old ways. Me and Clarence could lose the far, Sarruth."

Sarah forebore to point out that Eugene's former moonshine days had been almost fifty years ago. "You didn't have to bail him out," she said mildly. Sarah didn't think there was really any possibility that Beulah would risk the farm for Eugene.

"Your dear mama and my dear sister, God rest her soul, would've wanted me to. So you keep an eye on the old reprobate."

"Right. Well, thanks for the coffee, but I should go. I've got lots to do today. I'll call you tomorrow." With that, she was out the door. What was she doing in this mess, anyway? Why didn't she just let Mr. Gorgeous Bail Bondsman and Eugene chase each other all over the woods till winter?

The rest of the day passed agonizingly slowly. Sarah tried to paint, but with no success. One look in the refrigerator drove her outside, where she attacked the weeds in her mother's flower beds with a vengeance. Finally, she decided she better call Charlene and tell her she wouldn't be home for a while. Charlene, her friend and confidante who taught computer science at the college, answered breathlessly on the third ring.

"Sarah, I was about to call out the mili-

tia. It's not like you to rush off without telling anyone." There was a pause. "Nothing's happened, has it?"

"No. Just a little problem with Eugene. I should be back in a few days." She couldn't tell Charlene everything—not over the phone.

"Sarah; there's something you're not telling me."

Sarah chuckled at her vision of the quiz-zical look she knew was on Charlene's face. "Nothing. Believe me, nothing exciting ever happens down here. See you later." Sarah hung up the phone, wondering what she would do to pass the long evening ahead.

The sun was well behind the trees when Allen pulled into the yard. He sat in his car for a few minutes, watching for any signs of life in the house. It looked as if a dim light shone in the back. He finally got out of the car quietly and made his way up the steps.

The old wooden door stood ajar, and he heard a soft, lilting voice and a musical laugh. He'd been right on target. That voice was soft, educated, seductive. He called, "Anyone home?"

Sarah heard the voice shortly after she hung up the phone, and she knew instantly who owned it—the hunk with the ebony eyes.

"Jest a minit," she twanged as she walked through the darkened living room and peered through the screen door. "You back? Watcha want now?"

Allen opened the screen door and leaned around it until his face was mere inches from hers. His voice was soft. "I thought we might talk about your father."

Sarah caught the pure male scent softened only slightly by an intoxicating woodsy aftershave. "I tole you. He ain't here, and I dunno where he's at."

Allen put a hand on the partially open wooden door and pushed it a little farther

toward her. The clean scent of her body filled his nostrils. He took a deep breath and told himself to calm down. "I could come in and wait."

Panic washed over Sarah. She instinctively knew she had to keep this man out of the house. "He might not be here fer days."

Allen stepped into the room. "Well, I hadn't planned to wait that long, but I could certainly consider it. The least you could do is invite me in for coffee." His eyes burned into hers. "Or something."

Sarah felt herself sliding deeper into the hole she'd started digging only yesterday. "I ain't havin' no truck with you, mister. You jest get in yur car and head back the way you come."

"Well, now, surely a man who makes whiskey keeps a little in the house." He switched on a table lamp and looked back at Sarah, relishing the discomfort he was obviously causing her.

Sarah fought hard to keep her disguise intact. Anger was rapidly replacing whatever else she'd felt. Well, he wanted whiskey, he'd get it. One shot of Eugene's best would probably knock him on his can.

"Reckon I maht could find a little somethin'." She stomped into the kitchen and rummaged in the cupboard until she found a quart fruit jar full of clear liquid. She shook it, nodding with satisfaction as beads rose to the surface. That meant it was potent stuff. She poured an overflowing two ounces into one jelly glass and just a touch in another glass for herself, adding water to hers to make them equal.

Allen sat on the faded sofa thinking about Sarah. He'd never had any shortage of women, either before his marriage or since his divorce, but damned if one had ever hit him exactly like this.

Sarah handed him the jelly glass. "Hope yur man enough to drink this stuff." She upended her glass and swallowed all its contents, knowing from the

burn all the way to her stomach that it was more potent than usual. She gazed at him in challenge.

Allen upended his own glass, almost choking. Gathering his shattered dignity and what little will he could muster, he smiled and handed Sarah the glass, hoping she wouldn't notice that he wasn't breathing.

Sarah controlled her amazement. She knew he must be suffering. "Not bad fer a furriner," she remarked offhandedly.

She sauntered back into the kitchen and refilled the glasses with the same proportions, hoping he would start breathing soon. She returned to the living room and handed him the glass. "Better sip this one."

Allen stifled a huge sigh of relief at the suggestion. Pulling her down beside him, he said, "Now, let's talk about Eugene."

Sarah felt a jolt race up her arm from his touch. "Nothin' to talk about," she mumbled.

He leaned close to her. "Then however are we going to pass the hours?" The mild alcohol smell of his breath mixed with the scent of clean skin as he ran a finger along her jawline. "You're surely not afraid of me, are you?"

"I don't figger there's much there to be scairt of." She jumped up and headed toward the kitchen.

He followed her, knowing he was getting to her. He trapped her with one hand on a cabinet, the other on the door frame. "Ms. Branscum, don't you think it's time we dropped this little masquerade? I know you're Sarah Branscum, the art teacher from Harrison. So why don't you just tell me where your father is and where he's likely to be for the next week or so. And then you could tell me about you."

Allen leaned closer. Without thinking, he bent and touched her lips with his, tasting their softness. But almost immediately, surprised at his action, shocked by the

intensity of such a brief kiss, he stepped back.

When his lips met hers, Sarah had felt a charge go through her body as if she'd touched live wires. "Just who the hell do you think you are," she hissed at him, all trace of the dialect gone. "Get out of here."

He touched her cheek, "Sarah, I . . . look, could I just go back outside and start all over again?"

"No," Sarah sensed he'd been as surprised by the kiss as she had, but she wasn't about to give an inch.

"Please? I'm not the enemy, really."

"How could I know that?"

"I have a job to do, but that has nothing to do with the fact that I'd like to get to know you better."

"How can you say that? You're going to drag Eugene off to jail." She ducked under his arm.

"You do the dialect really well."

"If you knew my relatives, you'd understand why."

"Why?"

"Why what?" She knew it was coming.

"Why go to such lengths to make me think you're a native?"

"It seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"You must love your father very much."

"That's not exactly how I would describe the relationship. You want to leave now?"

"We could talk instead."

"About what? Fathers?"

"Yes. Mine is recovering from a heart attack. I guess I feel as protective of him as you do of yours."

Sarah went and opened the door. "It's an obligation. For all I care . . . anyway, I'm tired."

He walked to the door. "Funny, it doesn't strike me that way, Sarah. I'm leaving now. Obviously, you don't want

to talk about Eugene. But I'll be back." He smiled. "Actually, I'm a very nice person if you'll give me a chance. After all, we do have unfinished business." He quickly walked out of the house.

Retreating to the living room, Sarah sank on the couch. She knew that she should get out and let Eugene manage the best he could. Which brought her back to the sticky point of why she'd made a fool of herself on Eugene's account. She decided not to dwell on that.

Two days later, Allen straightened his cramped body and banged his head for the umpteenth time, this time hard enough to wake himself. What was he doing in a camper in the woods? Then he reminded himself that he'd vowed to stay right here, just outside of Sarah's backyard, until he found Eugene Branscum.

He sat on the edge of the miserable excuse for a bed and wondered if he'd be able to stand it another night. Glancing out the window, he looked at the Branscum house in the early morning light, squirming as he thought of Sarah tucked comfortably in a nice big bed, all alone.

Allen slipped into briefs and put on the coffee, sitting down on the bunk again since there was no place else to sit and not enough room to stand. He wondered if this was all worth it. Then he thought about Sarah's long legs and deep blue eyes and decided it was.

Sarah woke up at seven after a sleepless night. She longed for a cup of strong coffee, but had no idea how to make it in Eugene's old perculator. Sighing, she dressed and gathered her art supplies, deciding that she would find the woodpecker she needed for her bird series.

As she left the house for the woods, she was amazed to see a sleek new camper parked at the entrance to the campground. She remembered how her mother had

worried about early campers and had always hurried over to offer them water or anything else they might need, but she decided against being a Good Samaritan.

Sarah opened the gate into the campground, heading toward the woods beyond. Passing the camper, she caught the aroma of strong, hot coffee and veered toward the tantalizing odor. Oh, well, as long as she was this close, she supposed she could at least say hello. And maybe beg a cup of coffee.

She knocked lightly on the side door and heard a loud thump that sounded like a head hitting the roof, followed by a string of curses. She stepped back just as the door rattled and a gruff voice said, "Yes?"

The door slid open and Sarah found herself on eye level with a pair of well-filled crimson briefs . . . Her eyes the size of dinner plates, she glanced up—into the grinning face of Allen Ames. She felt a flush start at the back of her neck and move around to her cheeks.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she demanded. She hoped anger—and she was angry—would hide the other feelings trying to surface.

"It's a public campground, isn't it? I had some vacation coming, and I thought I'd spend it enjoying the great outdoors. How about some coffee?"

Sarah couldn't decide whether she was almost drooling over the smell of the coffee or over the expanse of skin and the mat of dark hair looming all too close before her. "Coffee, sure, but over there." She pointed toward the nearby picnic tables. "And you might put some clothes on."

He laughed, the deep, rich sound echoing through the quiet morning woods. "I thought you were enjoying the scenery. Anything in your coffee?"

"Black." Sarah went and sat down on a bench, seething both at his attitude and at her reaction to him.

He appeared moments later in jeans that

fit much too well, topped by a faded shirt that was open to the waist. He set the coffee in front of her. "Now, Sarah Branscum, what can I do for you this fine spring morning?"

Sarah glowered at the handsome face, marred only by a morning stubble. "You can quit following me."

"But, Sarah, dear, I'm not following you. I'm camped out in a public campground that just happens to be near your place."

"I do not know where Eugene is. And I'm not your dear," she added.

"A matter of time." He studied a tree across the way. "I did some checking yesterday at the courthouse. Did you know it's been more than twenty years since anyone's been arrested for moonshining?"

"Leave it to Eugene to revive it. He was a moonshiner when he met my mother but he gave it up when they got married. Although what club she used over his head I never figured out."

Allen shrugged. "Men do things for the women they love." He could see the pain in her eyes when she spoke of her mother. He wanted to ask about her, but knew that Sarah would bolt if he touched that nerve.

"He probably could have provided for her better if he'd kept making whiskey. She could have left this place." Once again Sarah reflected bitterly on how Eugene had kept her mother in a little house in the middle of nowhere. Allen's voice interrupted her reverie.

"Did she want to leave?"

"I always thought she did. She enjoyed herself so much when I was in Fayetteville and she used to visit. But Eugene wouldn't leave."

Allen remarked. "My mother would have given her eye teeth to live in a place like this. She would have traded Kansas City for it in a minute."

"That's probably because she never had to live here."

"Yet you came back: Were you in Fayetteville long?"

"I taught high school for a while. Then the college made me a good offer." She wasn't about to admit to him that she couldn't stay in the same town with her former lover. It was just too painful.

Allen tugged the empty coffee cup from her hand and she jumped. Taking her hand, he said gently, "Sarah, we're going to be seeing a lot of each other, so why don't you relax. I was just going for more coffee."

Sarah jerked back her hand. "We are not going to be seeing a lot of each other. I'm going back to Harrison."

"Fine. That's where I live. How about dinner tonight?"

Sarah stared at the little-boy grin on his face. "We're not having dinner tonight or any other night. Don't you know what the word no means?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes it means no, sometimes it means maybe. Sometimes it even means yes."

"In this case, it means no. Thanks for the coffee. I have to try to catch my woodpecker in the morning light." She caught his quizzical look. "I paint birds." She rose to leave.

He caught her arm. "Sarah, I'm sure you're waiting for me to apologize for that kiss the other day, but I'm not going to. I didn't plan the kiss, it just happened. But I did enjoy it. I think you did, too. You can avoid me all you want, but sooner or later you'll have to deal with me."

"Let's make it later. Much later." She gathered up her sketch pad and headed for the woods, fighting the urge to run. Sarah sat by the little creek, which she thought had to be the most beautiful place in the world. But her mind turned to Allen Ames. Why didn't she just tell him to take a hike? He seemed to think he was God's gift to women. Like Rick . . .

Sarah had dated a variety of men in col-

lege. Then she'd met Rick. Sarah had been a senior, studying art. Rick had been an older graduate student in creative writing. She hadn't been able to believe that anyone as brilliant and handsome as Rick could be interested in her. She had loved him, given herself to him, been ready to marry him. But Rick was more into living together. And being taken care of—by her.

Sarah picked up her sketch pad, struggling to push her memories away. Since Rick, she'd been rational and practical. She'd buried herself in her art and never thought about what she might be missing . . . until last night.

"Just go back to town, get on with your life, and forget any wild fantasies about that . . . that person. You are playing with fire," she scolded herself.

"And fire burns." Allen's voice came softly across the silence of the woods.

She whirled to see him leaning against a tree. "Do you always go sneaking around the woods spying on people?" He had no right to come to her secret place.

"Nope. Just some people . . . actually, just certain beautiful women." He strolled toward her. "We didn't talk about your father yet. Well, anyway, we didn't discuss his current problem." He sat in the leaves beside her.

"I don't have anything to say. Right now, I don't particularly care where he is or what he's doing."

"Then why are you here?" he probed gently.

"Because my mother would have wanted me to come," she said quietly.

Allen gazed at the huge oak trees standing guard around the hollowed-out place near the creek where they sat. "I'll bet this was your secret place as a child."

"How'd you know that?"

"Because every child has a secret place, and this is the kind of quiet, gentle place you would choose. I'll bet you took your

mother wild flowers you dug up."

Sarah could almost feel her mother's hug, hear her words: "Take it back to the woods, honey. There's some wild things that just can't live in captivity." Maybe that's how her mother had seen Eugene—as a wild thing not to be changed or cooped up in a city. Suddenly, Sarah knew that she had to resolve her feelings about her father if she was going to get through this mess. But that didn't mean discussing her feelings with Allen Ames.

"If you change your mind about talking, I'm available." His voice had gone from gentle to seductive.

She stood to leave. "Obviously, I'll be seeing you whether I want to or not."

"You can count on it." Allen watched her walk away. In the four years since his divorce, since he'd moved to Harrison, there had been no special woman. Then he'd looked through a rusty screen at Sarah Branscum and felt a need to know everything about her. For the moment, he would give Sarah a respite—but only a temporary one.

Sarah was awakened about three a.m. by a noise in the bathroom. Slipping quietly out of bed she crept into the hall and reached toward the back of the closet where her mother had kept canned goods. Her hand closed around a quart jar of something.

Holding her blunt instrument at shoulder level, she silently crept down the hall. The rattling sounds continued; then a dark form filled the doorway. As her heart thumped in her chest, Sarah raised the jar high above her head, ready to bring it down in a killing blow.

"Didn't mean to wake you, Sarruth, honey." A blinding light flashed in her eyes.

"Dammitt, Eugene, you just scared the hell out of me. And turn the flashlight off."

"Didn't mean to scare you, honey. After all, I do live here." He headed for the kitchen and turned on the light. "How about a cup of coffee, honey?"

Sarah trailed behind, clutching her preserves. "Eugene, what are you doing?"

"Forgot my toothbrush." He busied himself with the coffee and the pot. "You enjoyin' your stay?"

"Eugene, how can you waltz in here in the middle of the night like nothing's happened and ask me if I'm enjoying my stay? I'm not here on vacation, you know. I'm here because you got arrested. I'm spending my time trying to keep your bail bondsman at bay."

"Now, don't go gettin' yourself all worked up, Sarruth. That ole boy'll never find me."

"Don't count on it, Eugene. He's very persistent."

He poured two mugs of coffee. "Set a spell, honey. I sure have missed your visits lately, Sarruth."

"I've been busy." Sarah nervously twisted her cup.

"Don't need to make excuses to your ole daddy, honey. I know you couldn't hardly stand to be around here after your ma passed on." He looked around the kitchen. "I couldn't hardly stand it, either. Reckon-maybe that's why I slipped back to my old ways."

Sarah looked up and saw a tear slide down his cheek.

"Even after a year, there's times I think I just can't stand it. I purely do miss that woman."

"So do I, Eugene." She twisted her cup again. "Eugene, you have to go to the hearing."

"Don't have to do nothin', 'cept die and pay taxes."

"Eugene, they'll come get you."

"Maybe. But they'll have to find me first. You figgerin' on gettin' married anytime soon?"

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?" Sarah jumped up and poured more coffee.

"Sure would like to see grandkids before I die."

"Well, don't count on me," she told him tartly. "I have a career to think about, a living to make. And men don't figure in my plans."

"Honey, honey, Chasin' that almighty dollar won't lead you to happiness."

"I like what I'm doing. And if you'd been a little more concerned about the dollar, you might not be hiding in the woods right now. Not to mention that Mama might have been able to enjoy something besides the woods." Her angry voice rang through the quiet house.

"Adele and me didn't have time to worry about money, Sarruth. We were too happy just enjoyin' life. I just wish you could have the same happiness."

His words jarred on Sarah. Of all the things she might wish for in life, living like her mother was not one of them.

Eugene stood up. "Well, honey, I'd best be gettin' back to camp."

"Eugene, what am I going to tell the bondsman? You'd better think about the consequences."

"Tell 'im to catch me if he can." He cackled. "Honey, an old bootlegger once gave me a mighty good piece of advice. He told me the worst they can do to you is kill you, and they can't kill you but once." He reached over to touch her cheek. "Honey, don't you see? It just don't matter what happens to me now. Without my Adele, *it just don't matter.*"

"Eugene, stay and face your problems like—" But he was gone, and when the roar of the truck had died in the distance, Sarah trudged back to bed.

This time as she lay waiting for sleep to take her, her thoughts were not on Allen Ames, but on her father—and her mother. She fell asleep with the memory of her

mother smiling and touching Eugene's cheek as she brought him his evening coffee.

And then her dream changed and Sarah saw herself touching Allen's cheek as she handed him a cup of coffee. He reached for her, his hand on her shoulder, tugging. She sighed and snuggled into that hand, pulling it closer. But abruptly, the hand jerked away, taking the covers with it.

"My Lord, Sarruth, I don't know what you was dreamin' about, and I don't think I want to know. But I do want you to get yourself outta that bed. We're goin' to find that old goat this mornin'." Aunt Beulah glared down at her. "Coffee's made."

Sarah quickly dressed and splashed water on her face. She headed for the coffee and Beulah, wondering how she could convince her aunt that an expedition into the woods was not on her agenda for the day when an insistent knock on the door invaded her consciousness. "Come in," she yelled.

She looked up to see Allen's tall frame fill the doorway. "Hi," he said cheerfully. "Hi."

Beulah pulled herself up to her full height. "We don't want to talk to no salesman."

Sarah threw a pleading look at Allen, noticing the twitching at the corners of his mouth. "Aunt Beulah, this is Allen Ames. He bailed Eugene out. Allen, my aunt Beulah." He extended a hand toward her aunt.

"He's not the sleazebag took my hard-earned money. Git on outta here." The old woman backed toward the counter and took up a defensive posture.

Sarah felt her face freeze. She'd never heard her aunt talk like that. She barely registered the fact that someone other than Allen had actually put up the bail. She stared in shock at her aunt. "Aunt Beulah! Sleazebag? Where'd you come up with

that?"

"I may live in the hills, but I watch Miami Vice like everyone else. I know about his kind."

Sarah looked at Allen. "I can't believe this," she muttered.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am." Allen advanced on Beulah with his hand out.

The old woman sidestepped him and darted toward the door. "Well, Sarruth, if this is the kind o' man you come draggin' home, maybe you'd best stick with birds. She disappeared, and the front door slammed.

Allen shrugged and poured a cup of coffee and sat down. "I came over to see if you wanted to ride into town today." He reached out and stroked her hand. "And because I wanted to see you."

"Oh." She felt the heat from his hand course up her arm. "I don't think I can go to town today."

"Sarah, I know Eugene was here last night. I heard the truck. Even if I hadn't heard the truck, I could take one look at that pretty face of yours and tell."

Relief washed over Sarah, but it rapidly turned to suspicion. "If you knew he was here, why didn't you do something?"

"I'm not in the habit of bursting into people's houses at three o'clock in the morning. Besides, I know he's staying in the area, and I thought you might be able to talk sense to him."

"Oh, I did talk to him," she said, a bitter edge to her voice. "Quote, 'The worst thing they can do to you is kill you, and they can only do that once.' End quote."

"Hmmm."

"Allen, why don't I just give you the bail money and you can forget all about Eugene?"

"Sarah, the bond is ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dollars! For an old man playing cops and robbers? No wonder Beulah was so upset!"

"It's a class D felony, Sarah. I don't think the judge would have gone so high except for the attempted bribery." Allen reached for her hand.

"Oh, Lord. Don't tell me Eugene tried to bribe the judge." Why hadn't she known the bond was so high? "I could still pay you, couldn't I?" In the unlikely event that she found ten grand hiding under Clyde.

"I'm afraid it's not that simple, Sarah." He frowned at his coffee. "But I'll check it out while I'm in town."

It had never occurred to Sarah until Beulah had made her crack about him not being the person she'd dealt with that Allen might be working for someone else. But before she could question him further, Allen continued, "Now, you have fifteen minutes to get ready."

"Ready?"

"We're going to town, remember?"

"Oh, alright. I guess I need to go into the college anyway." Sarah rose and headed for the bedroom. Nothing like being decisive, she thought wryly as she changed into her go-to-town clothes and walked back into the kitchen.

"Umm. You look gorgeous in real clothes." His eyes roamed over the blue sundress, which made her eyes look even bigger and bluer. Taking her hand, he led her out of the house and handed her into the big Mercury.

Sarah sat as close to the door as she could manage without falling out of the car.

"You don't have to sit clear over there, you know," he drawled. "I promise I won't assault you." Idly, Allen stroked her neck with his right hand. "Your aunt certainly is a character."

"That's one way to put it," she said defensively.

"Hey, that wasn't meant to be derogatory." He shot her a glance. "Is she Eugene's sister?"

"No, my mother's. Beulah and my father have had a running feud since before I was born. She always said Eugene would 'go back to his sinful ways.' She's been waiting fifty years to say 'I told you so.'"

Allen chuckled. "If she doesn't like Eugene, why'd she and her husband stand his bail?"

Sarah shrugged. "Who knows? Probably that sort of martyred obligation to family some people feel. I guess Beulah doesn't have much excitement in her life."

"Meeting a real-life sleazebag should give her enough excitement to last a lifetime."

"I'm really sorry about that." Sarah glanced at him, but he was smiling.

"No problem. It's a commonly held opinion about bail bondsmen, I've discovered. Why did Eugene suddenly go back to his old ways?"

"I guess it started after my mother died."

Allen nodded. "I lost my mother a few years ago, too. It makes sense."

"It may make sense to you, but not to me."

"I think it's harder on a man when he loses a wife than the other way around," Allen elaborated.

"Yeah. They lose the cook and maid service."

"Oh-ho. Do I detect a note of cynicism? I take it your parents weren't happy."

In spite of herself, she began to talk, suddenly struck with a need to share with him the conflicting emotions she'd grappled with over the past few days—emotions she should have dealt with years ago. "Depends on whom you talk to. According to Eugene, they were deliriously happy. According to my memories, she waited on him, spent her entire adult life in that little house in the middle of nowhere tending her flowers and Eugene. She was a beautiful lady. She could have really done something with her life."

"Are you sure she wasn't happy?"

"I just don't know anymore. And there's no one to ask except Eugene. You just don't think your parents are going to die, so you get busy with your own life and don't take time to talk about the things that are important."

"I know. I'm trying not to make that mistake with my father. There are a few great loves in this world, Sarah, and they don't need anything or anyone else. I think my mom and dad came real close to sharing that kind of love."

She heard a wistfulness in his voice and sought his eyes. "You really think it exists?"

"Oh, yes, Sarah, I really think it does. It just takes the right chemistry." He reached down and squeezed her hand. "I think you and I might have that chemistry."

Panic threatened to overwhelm Sarah. If he thought for a single moment that she would devote her life to him, he was greatly mistaken. She saw, with relief, that they were at the edge of Harrison, and said quickly, "Just drop me off at the college, please."

His rich laughter filled the car. "Don't panic, dear." He drove in silence until they reached the campus. As she started to open the door, he slid across the seat and pulled her close. His lips touched hers, gentle, undemanding.

In spite of herself, Sarah responded to the fire he ignited in her body. Panicking suddenly, Sarah pulled back and almost fell out of the car.

He caught her before she could run. "I don't think even *you* can deny there's something between us," he said, then added, "Pick you up at five."

Allen found his father, binoculars to his eyes, seated in front of the patio door in the den, watching the purple martins as they darted in and out of the birdhouse in the backyard. "Hi, Dad." Allen noticed an

improvement in Gilbert's color, but he still had a drawn look.

Gilbert Ames waved absentmindedly at him and put the binoculars down on the table beside him. "Where have you been for the past few days?"

"Camping in the woods."

"You? Camping? She must be some looker to get you out in the woods." Gilbert laughed. "Well?"

"Oh, she is, Dad. A princess." Allen played the game with his father, which was not totally a game. He knew Gilbert still had high hopes for grandchildren.

"I'll just bet. How's business?"

"Yours or mine?" Allen was glad to see that Gilbert was shaved and dressed. After the heart attack, the old man had gone through a period of not getting dressed, saying he didn't have anywhere to go, so why bother?

"Mine, Allen. What about old man Branscum? I've been worried about that one. I figure he'll take off on me."

Allen took a deep breath. "I meant to talk to you about him. I spoke with his daughter. She offered to pay the whole bail amount—get us out of it."

"Absolutely not," Gilbert said indignantly. "Why should I give back the ten percent they already put up? That bond should be an easy thousand for me. That means he's already taken off. Damn, Allen, we'll have to go get him."

Allen warned himself to stay calm. "Dad, you know the hearing won't amount to anything. He'll get six months suspended. He must be at least seventy."

"Allen, what you don't understand about this business is that we're in a small community, and everybody knows everybody else's business. If I let him skip out, then they'll all start to skip out. Now, you go pick him up." Gilbert shot Allen a shrewd look. "Remember, if she's that interested in giving you ten grand, that means he's already skipped. So if you

don't want to go find him, I will. Or revoke the bond. I can do that, you know, then pick him up."

"Oh, no, you won't. You know what the doctor said. I'll take care of it. Why couldn't you just retire and fish or something?"

"Now, Allen. You know this is a very important business. Before I got into it, that crook from the next county was stealing these poor people blind. I take care of my people and they take care of me. That's why I'm not about to let Branscum upset the apple cart."

Allen sighed. His father saw the bail business as a necessary service to poor people. Allen wasn't sure he understood all the reasoning, but it made Gilbert happy, and that was what mattered. Still, the sweeping discretionary powers of bondsmen disturbed Allen. By law, Gilbert could revoke Eugene's bond and send the old moonshiner to jail. Allen turned to leave. "I have some things to do at the office, Dad. I'll see you later."

"Keep me posted on Branscum."

"Right." Allen left and headed for his office, wondering how he was going to explain all this to Sarah.

Sarah stood in the campus parking lot, trying to look inconspicuous. She spotted the big Mercury and felt her pulse accelerate. She had her questions all prepared. This time she wouldn't huddle in the corner like a wallflower. If she was going have a fling with this man, which looked likely given his persistence and her attraction to him, she needed to at least know a few things about him. She smiled as she got in the car. "Well, did you catch any desperadoes today?"

"Not one." He smiled back.

"What do you do besides chase criminals or bail them out?" She flashed him another smile.

"Oh, I sell a little real estate here and

there."

That figured. Practically everyone in the area sold real estate part-time. "Where do you come from and have you ever been married?"

He was obviously puzzled by the sudden interrogation, but answered anyway. "Kansas City, divorced five years ago, no children, my wife had a mid-life crisis and went off to be a full-time drama student—and I like cats and dogs and small children, and I would very much like to make love to you." He reached over and squeezed her hand. "Did I cover your whole list?"

Sarah flushed. She would have to take a different tack. "Did your wife really have a mid-life crisis?"

"I guess so. I was too busy becoming Mr. Success Story to pay attention to her and what was happening. I wanted kids, she didn't. We just kind of drifted apart."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I. Or at least I was for the first couple of years, but now I think it was inevitable." He frowned at the road and changed the subject. "I thought we'd have dinner at the Cliff House. Is that okay with you?"

"Sounds nice." She cleared her throat. "Allen, you know Eugene is really just a harmless old man."

He shot her a questioning glance. "I know."

"Have you decided whether I can just pay you the bail?" *In the unlikely event I strike gold in the kitchen*, she added to herself.

"Not yet. Don't worry about it until the time comes." Sarah was relieved when they pulled in at the Cliff House. "I don't know when I ate here last," Sarah commented as they passed through the souvenir shop into the dining room. "It used to be merely a tourist trap."

"That was before these folks bought it." Allen led her into a room that was a huge,

glassed-in porch hanging out over the deep valley. "It is now one of the real treats in the area. Maybe in the whole world. Their hamburgers and fries are an almost erotic experience."

Sarah laughed. Just what she needed at this point in her life. "Sounds good to me."

Allen ordered, and then they both looked out the window. The view was spectacular. The late afternoon sun left parts of the great valley in darkness, while turning other parts golden. "What was it like to grow up in this part of the country?" Allen asked.

Sarah thought back to her childhood. "I spent a lot of my free time wandering around in the woods. I used to come home from my treks and draw pictures of what I'd seen. You've never seen real art till you've seen a blue-bird done in Crayola."

He chuckled. "Did you keep any of them?"

"No, but I know my mother did. When I'm rich and famous, they'll probably be worth loads of money."

"Is that what you want to be? Rich and famous?"

"I think I really just want to capture some of this beauty on paper." She waved toward the mountains. "I want people to look at my birds and think they're going to fly off the paper and land in their hair."

He laughed. "I'd like to see some of them."

"Maybe sometime I'll let you." At that moment, the waitress brought their meal. "Oh, my, look at those potatoes," she murmured, digging in. They ate in silence, unable to divert their attention from the luscious burgers. When their plates were clean, Allen sat back. "Coffee?" he asked. She nodded. Steaming mugs of fresh coffee soon replaced the plates. As they drank in companionable silence, the sinking sun set fire to the faraway mountains. "Ready?" Allen finally asked.

The time had flown. "I didn't realize we'd been here so long." She shivered when they stepped out the door, and Allen pulled her close.

Sarah wanted to hold on to the magic of the evening and snuggled close to Allen after they got into the car.

"That's much better," he said, putting his arm around her. A lovely warmth began deep inside her and spread through her body. Sitting pressed against him she knew she wanted more than a fling, and that thought frightened her.

Allen pulled into her driveway and cut the engine and lights. He turned and studied her. "I enjoyed dinner very much. We need to make a habit of it."

"I enjoyed it, too." His hand slipped behind her head and drew her closer. She touched his chest, feeling him shiver as her lips opened to meet his. His hands stroked and burned her skin, circling and teasing her aching breasts. Her desire started deep inside and spread outward. She felt abandoned when he pulled back to look at her.

"I think we're supposed to be in the backseat," he teased huskily.

"We could go in the house."

"Umm." He trailed kisses down her throat. "I think that's a grand idea."

But as they got out of the car and the cool night air touched Sarah's fiery skin, suddenly she needed time, breathing room. "What if Aunt Beulah shows up?"

Sarah could feel Allen gathering his passion under tight control, and she felt a sense of loss. "Maybe we could walk in the woods."

In reply, Allen took her hand and they walked toward the campground. Allen perched on the picnic table near his camper and drew her between his legs. "What am I going to do about you, Sarah?"

Desire surged from his body to hers, but she also sensed the tight control he exercised. She knew the decision must be

hers. "I don't know."

"Sarah, you know I want you. If you say no, that will be it. But I want to make love to you. I want to take you on a trip to the stars, love."

Sarah pulled his head down and let her kiss answer. His hands burned through her thin dress. There was just enough daylight left for her to see the desire burning in his eyes. After several long moments, he drew away.

"Stay right where you are." Allen disappeared into the camper.

Sarah stared into the dusk. The mournful cry of a whippoorwill rang in her ear, causing her to shiver. Her body ached for Allen, but suddenly, with that cry from the whippoorwill, she knew it was too soon for her to make love with him.

Allen emerged holding a down sleeping bag, which he spread on the woods side of the camper. He came to her and touched her now-rigid body, paused, then pulled her close. "I blew it, didn't I, love?"

She buried her face against his chest, hiding the tears that threatened to erupt. "I don't guess you'd want to see one of the old homesteads out in the woods, would you?"

He stroked her back as if it were the most reasonable question. "I guess I would at that. Which way?"

She took his hand and led him unerringly to a small clearing in the woods. A pile of stones lay where steps might once have been. Allen pulled Sarah down to sit beside him on the stones. "Why don't you tell me about whoever he was?" he said softly.

She had never told anyone about Rick, but in the security of the darkness and his closeness, she began to talk. Her words tumbled out as she relived the hurt and disillusionment; the year they'd lived together while she worked and cooked and cleaned and he'd supposedly written; the passion and love she'd felt for him; her

gradual realization that she was becoming enslaved to him. "I guess that's when I finally realized that Mother had done nothing but cook and clean and do for Eugene all those years. Anyway, I told Rick to leave. Even after all that had happened, telling him to go was the most difficult thing I ever did."

Allen sat up and gently kissed her cheek. "He was a bastard. He used you. I could never do that to you."

"Don't say things like that, Allen."

"I have to speak my mind. Sarah, you can't hang onto old hurts. We can have something rare and wonderful, but not if you're too afraid to try."

"I know, at least on an intellectual level. Maybe after all this mess with Eugene is cleared up . . ."

"There will be some other reason then. Give me a chance, Sarah." He stood up and pulled her up with him. "Just think about it, sweet." He kissed her tenderly, yet with hidden fire. "Thanks for bringing me here."

Her reply was, lost as he kissed her again.

The next morning Sarah was still asleep when the phone rang. She sighed and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Sarruth, have you seen Eugene?"

"No, Aunt Beulah. Why?"

"Somebody at the store this morning told Clarence they saw smoke down n Wolf Creek. They figger it's Eugene and I want you to go down there and get him."

"Aunt Beulah, how am I supposed to get him if he doesn't want to be got?"

"Well, if you won't, I'll just call the sheriff and have him bring the old rascal in."

"I'll go see him today," Sarah capitulated.

"Is that salesman still hangin' around?"

"Aunt Beulah, he's not—"

"I know his kind. You lock your doors

tight at night, Sarruth. No tellin' what he might try."

Sarah stifled a giggle. "Right. Talk to you later."

She hung up the phone and looked longingly at her paints. She supposed she should go find Eugene, but she knew Beulah was only an excuse to see him. Sarah needed to talk to her father about her mother.

Sarah put on her jeans and hiking boots and drove within a half-mile or so of where she assumed Eugene was. She parked the Volkswagen on the edge of an old logging road and hiked toward the creek. When she came to the end of the crude road at the top of a rise, Eugene's camp lay spread out before her, just across the creek. She stood staring down at the peaceful glade filled with all the necessities of the moonshiner's trade.

Eugene had built a little lean-to from saplings and roofed it with a ratty old army tarp. It housed boxes and sacks of what Sarah assumed must be corn. Several wooden barrels sat in a neat row, all full of some bubbling fluid. The still consisted of a huge copper vat with spiraling copper tubing projecting out of the lid. The tubing ran into the top of a wooden barrel and emerged at the bottom, just above a neat line of fruit jars that were waiting to be filled. A propane tank furnished the heat for the copper vat.

Eugene sat in an aluminum lawn chair near the still. The air was redolent with the smell of sour mash cooking. Her fingers itched for a pad and paints; it would make a fantastic painting. Finally reminding herself why she was there, she called to her father. "Eugene!"

The old man whirled around, clutching at a shotgun that lay beside his chair, then smiled when he saw her. "Come on across, honey."

She negotiated the stones across the narrow part of the creek. "Quite a setup

you've got here, Eugene."

He swelled with obvious pride. "It is right nice. Best rig I've ever had. How'd you find me, Sarruth?"

"Followed the smell." She examined the still. When she looked up, he was studying her.

"You look different today, honey. You got a glow to you—makes you look more like your mama than ever. You got a boyfriend?"

"No. Eugene, Beulah's ready to send out the National Guard to drag you in."

"Damned old busybody." He produced another lawn chair from behind the still. "Set a spell."

Sarah reluctantly sat down and decided to plunge right in. "Eugene, didn't Mama ever want to get out of this place and go somewhere exciting?"

Eugene grinned as he tapped tobacco from a string bag into a cigarette paper. "Sounds like my little girl's checkin to see if her pappy's really the no-good she always thought he was."

Sarah shifted uneasily. "I didn't mean—"

"Oh, honey, I've known all these years you didn't have too good an opinion of me." He licked the paper, pinched the ends, and lit the flimsy cigarette. "But I kept lovin' you just the same."

"Eugene, I—"

"Don't worry about it. You was askin' about your mama." He looked through her into another time and place. "I'll never forget the night. I was a grown man. Went to a dance over to Deer, and there she was, purtiest little thing you ever seen. I looked at her and she looked at me, and that was all either of us needed to know. She was only sixteen. I courted her for two weeks, then we run off to Harrison and got married. Ole Beulah never has got over it."

Eugene took a long drag from the cigarette. "Your mama thought these mountains was about the most excitin' place in

the world. Ever' flower, ever' little critter in the woods. She loved 'em all. And she loved me, though I'll never know why." He leaned toward Sarah. "I know you'll never understand it, Sarruth, but we had somethin' men dream about. We didn't need no bright lights and fancy places."

Sarah sat spellbound, almost able to see them look at each other across the room. "I guess it happens," she murmured skeptically.

"Oh, it happens, honey."

"Mama would want you to go the hearing, Eugene," she said quietly.

"Don't think so, honey." Eugene's voice was even quieter. "Your mama was a tolerant woman—had to be to put up with me. You're a lot like her, honey, but you got a little hard streak she didn't have." He put up a hand to quell her objection. "Prob'ly got it from me, but it's somethin' you need to learn to reckon with."

"You're not going to the hearing, then? That's your last word?" Eugene's musings had hit too close to home, and the need to get away overwhelmed her.

"That's my last word. They want me, they can find me." He looked Sarah squarely in the eye. "I loved your mama more than life itself, baby. And she loved me. You think about that."

"Eugene, you're being mule-headed."

"I know honey. You take care o' yourself, now." His voice sounded weary.

Sarah trudged back to her car with her mind more muddled than ever. You didn't just look at somebody and fall in love for life. It just couldn't work—except that it had worked for her mother. Or so her father said.

Sarah pulled into the quaint mountain town of Jasper and parked in front of the courthouse. The night before she'd decided to contact the sheriff and see if there was any possibility of getting the charges against Eugene dropped.

She walked into the sheriff's office and found it empty. "Hello?" she called.

"Help you?" A tall, lean man in bright jeans and a crisp white shirt appeared from a back office. His hair was a wiry steel gray, his eyes pale blue.

"I'm looking for the sheriff." She hoped her voice carried authority, but seriously doubted it.

"You found him. Harry Jackson." His face crinkled into a smile as he extended a hand.

"I'm Sarah Branscum."

"Well, now. I guess you'll be wantin' to talk about your pappy." At her nod, he continued, "Well, I hope you're not here to offer me a bribe. That's what got Eugene in trouble to begin with."

Sarah nodded again. Leave it to Eugene.

"I haven't been sheriff very long, but I've lived in these parts all my life. Ever'body knew Eugene was makin' 'shine. I guess you know he doesn't even sell the stuff—just gives it to his old cronies. Anyhow, I was prepared to look the other way. Then the old goat shows up here one day offerin' me money and I just flat got mad. Thought it was time he learned a lesson."

"So you arrested him."

"That I did. Went out and smashed his still, too." He shook his head. "Kinda wish I hadn't done it, now. Judge'll prob'ly let him off—if he shows up for the hearing. You make sure he shows up, hear?"

"I don't suppose you could just—you know—drop the charges? I mean, if he's going to get off anyway."

"I could, but I don't take kindly to bribery, and it won't hurt him to sweat a little. He'll be okay if he shows, but the judge is mighty tough on no-shows."

"Well, I'll do my best to get him to the hearing."

"You need any help, give a call. By the

way, aren't you the Sarah Branscum had that bunch of bird pictures up at the college a while back?"

Sarah showed her surprise. "Yes, Did you see it?"

The sheriff ducked his head. "Well, my wife dragged me along. I'm glad she did. She like to had a fit over that whippoorwill of yours. She's never been able to catch sight o' one. She sure was sorry that picture wasn't for sale."

"It's part of a series I'm doing. I'm glad she liked it. Well, thanks." Sarah started for the door.

"Nice to meet you, Miz Branscum."

Sarah wandered out to her car. So much for the sheriff. She turned her car toward Harrison. She would get back to work on her commission, and try to forget her father for a few hours.

An hour later, Sarah sat in her own house gazing at the bluejay she'd been working on the morning Beulah called, wondering what she should do. By the time a knock rattled the door, she had worked herself into a state of anxiety and indecision of unprecedented proportions. She opened the door to find Allen standing there grinning. "You're now following me again, are you?"

"It does my heart good to know how much you've missed me." He sauntered into her studio and stopped short, his eyes scanning the paintings hanging on all the walls and scattered over every flat surface. "Oh, Sarah, they're exquisite! You have a touch that's just incredible. You should be painting full-time instead of teaching, too."

"Well . . ." Sarah felt a warm glow spread through her at his words—or his nearness, or both.

"I'm serious. You're going to be famous one day."

"I don't think so. Not with birds." Sarah pulled her eyes away from the intensity of his look.

"We'll see. Audubon did okay." He seemed to sense her discomfort. "Anyway, I'm on call for the weekend, starting tomorrow. So, I put together a truly magnificent picnic, which I thought we would take to Lost Valley."

Sarah frowned. "I don't know. I need to work."

He put an arm around her waist. "You can work later. I'm offering an afternoon of good food, delightful company, beautiful scenery, and who knows what else."

It was the "who knows what else" that worried Sarah. "We'd have to be home by dark," she hedged.

Allen's eyes twinkled. "Agreed, although I really don't turn into a vampire, and I can turn into a wolf just as well in full sunlight . . ."

"Don't push your luck." She should be perfectly safe in a public place. *Safe from Allen, or safe from yourself?* an inner voice taunted. But by the time they reached the Lost Valley parking area, she was relaxed and glad she'd come.

Allen pulled a basket and a rolled-up sleeping bag from the backseat. "Ready?" He shouldered the bedroll and picked up his basket.

Sarah noticed a distinct absence of other cars in the parking lot as she followed Allen through the stile the Park Service had erected to keep motorized vehicles out of the area. So much for a public place.

Following Allen's broad back, she forgot everything except the beauty of the canyon through which they climbed, winding steadily upward. Wild flowers bloomed in profusion along the swift-running creek that poured through a large opening in a solid bluff and descended in a sparkling waterfall.

They continued to climb, finally reaching a huge limestone overhang known as Cob Cave, so named by early settlers who'd found corn cobs left by the Indians who had sheltered there centuries ago. Al-

len unrolled the sleeping bag at the entrance of the cave, in full sight of the waterfall, while Sarah gazed at the rushing water.

Allen dug into his basket and retrieved an amazing collection of smoked meats, dark bread, cheeses, fruit, and a bottle of white wine, all of which he laid out on the sleeping bag. Sarah stared at the array. "I didn't know we were going to be here all summer."

"That's not a bad idea," he said, engaged in building her a huge sandwich. Then he whipped out two elegant wineglasses and poured the pale liquid into them.

Sarah laughed in spite of herself. "Nothing like roughing it," she said, taking one of the fragile glasses.

"One must maintain a little class in all things." He sat cross-legged and took a bite of his sandwich, watching Sarah. "You look lovely against that waterfall."

Sarah nibbled her sandwich and sipped the wine, at the same time drinking in the beauty around her and the beauty of the man watching her. Now that they were away from civilization, just the two of them in a magical place, Sarah knew with a new certainty what Allen meant to her. She was in love with him, in spite of what might happen with Eugene, in spite of her early reluctance to love again. In the magic of this lost valley of the Indians, all things were possible.

When they'd finished eating, she reached across the jumble of food to touch his face, her eyes never leaving his. He remained stock still, although she felt a quiver go through his body at her touch. Then his hand took hers and he pressed her palm against his lips. Sarah shuddered as the warmth spread up her arm. He pulled her closer until their lips touched. She felt the fire spread. The gentle pressure of his kiss turned to a hot, seeking desire, and she responded with a passion

she'd never even dreamed lay within her.

"Sarah, love, come to me."

"Yes, Allen," she murmured as white heat coursed through her veins. She felt his hard body against hers as he pulled her down on the cushiony spread and she pressed against him, her hands buried in his mane of black hair. His hands shaking slightly, he undid the buttons of her blouse and unfastened her front-hook bra to release her throbbing, aching breasts. She pulled off his shirt, anxious to feel his skin against hers, then touched his chest, marveling at the lean, hard muscles.

Allen slipped the blouse and bra from her shoulders and gazed at the white breasts dappled with shadows. "You're so beautiful, love." Her jeans fell away as he trailed kisses down the softness of her stomach. "Are you sure, Sarah?"

"I'm sure." He stood and dropped his jeans, then the bright red briefs, and she looked at his naked body, desire burning brightly in her eyes. She gazed at his perfect physique, freezing it in her mind for all time, then opened her arms. He came to her, his hands and lips covering her skin with a multitude of sensations beyond her wildest dreams. She explored his tense body with hot hands, wanting to know all of him. She captured his face in her hands and savored his kisses. As she felt their bodies meld together with a fierce heat the magical forest exploded into a fantasy of colors and pleasure and they become one with the roaring, shimmering waterfall.

Sarah lay wrapped in his arms, her mind reeling, her body still quivering. "Happy?" Allen kissed her face.

"Yes." A whippoorwill cried nearby. This time, its cry rang with a beauty she'd never heard before.

Sarah sat up. "I've painted them from photographs, but I've never seen one in the wild. Oh, Allen, do you think we could find it?"

Allen laughed and kissed her gently. "I

must say I've never been thrown over for a bird before."

Concern etched her face. "Oh, I didn't mean . . ."

"I know what you meant, love. Come on." He quickly dressed and helped her into her clothes.

They stood in the deep shadow of the cave and scanned the woods. When the bird cried again, Allen spotted its white throat. Sarah followed his pointing finger and saw the bird perched on the limb of a redbud tree. They crept closer, her artist's eye recording each nuance of the color on the gray-brown bird but it took flight as they neared. Sarah heaved a mighty sigh. "Wasn't it beautiful?"

Allen hugged her. "It looked like a rather common brown bird to me, but what do I know?"

"I'm glad we saw it," Sarah said as they began to gather up the picnic things. "I've never seen a live one before. Very few people do. It's been a perfect day."

"So it has, Sarah Branscum. So it has." He tilted her chin so she was looking into his eyes, and then said quietly, tenderly, "I love you." He pulled her close and kissed her with a gentle longing.

Sarah tasted the sweetness of his kiss and knew that Lost Valley would always be a special place for her. She had rediscovered the wonder of love today, and nothing could dampen the magic.

Sarah spent the night in Harrison, but departed for Eugene's house early the next morning. She could hardly wait to put the whippoorwill on paper. The elusive bird was etched in her memory along with all the other details of the afternoon with Allen.

She flew into the little house, going straight to her paints. She had just started mixing the delicate browns when Beulah sailed through the door.

"Sarruth, I was about ready to send out

the National Guard for you, too. You never did tell me what Eugene said or if you even talked to him."

"I talked to him, Aunt Beulah, day before yesterday or whenever it was. Don't worry, if he isn't at the hearing, I'll pay back whatever it cost you and Clarence to bail him out."

"That ain't what that man said."

"What man, Aunt Beulah?"

"Man called last night, said he was goin' back on the bond, or somethin' like that."

A twinge of fear shot through Sarah. Surely Allen wouldn't have called Beulah—not last night of all nights! "Did he say who he was?"

"Didn't ask. Tole him to do what he had to do."

Sarah's mind raced. Maybe it was the sheriff trying to put the fear of God into Eugene. Or it could have been Allen's partner or employer. Relief washed over Sarah. That was probably who it was. She'd talk to Allen and straighten things out. "Don't worry about it, Aunt Beulah. I'll take care of it."

"Well, I gotta get home. We're plantin' corn today."

Sarah watched her aunt depart and sighed. She knew it was useless to try to save Eugene from himself. She would finish her bird.

By that evening, the shy bird rested quietly on a branch, almost camouflaged by leaves, only the white throat and bright eyes peering out from the paper.

Allen had not called, so Sarah assumed he was doing whatever bail bondsmen did on Saturday nights. She wondered what she was going to do to kill the long night and the next day until she saw Allen again. She finally went to bed, hugging her memories of Allen close.

She awoke sometime in the night with something warm nuzzling her neck. Sarah stretched and turned to the dark form sit-

ting on the bed. "I thought you were out chasing drunks." She heard the sounds of clothing being discarded, and her heart began to race.

"I was, but all the drunks seem to have gone home, so I thought I'd drop in." Allen slipped into bed beside her.

Sarah turned to him, his cool body against her warmth shocking her fully awake. His strong arms pulled her close. "I've missed you."

Sarah stroked his back, touching, teasing, reveling in the strength of his hard, lean body. As her body warmed his, she felt the heat building. "I missed you, too."

His kisses touched her breasts, trailing ever hotter down her stomach. "Oh, sweetheart, you're lovely." Sarah gave herself to the overwhelming feelings of love and warmth she'd kept locked away so long.

Their loving was slow, agonizingly sweet as they traveled ever upward toward the stars. They became one in an explosion of feeling which reached to their very souls. Wrapped in his warmth she dozed in the cocoon of happiness and his strong arms.

"Sarah?"

She snuggled closer. "Why do we have to get up?" she murmured into his chest, nibbling at his skin.

"Because it's daylight, and knowing your aunt, she might show up at any moment."

At the mention of Beulah, Sarah sat straight up.

"I thought that would get your attention." Allen playfully swatted her through the sheet, then fled to the bathroom. "I would invite you to shower with me, but the thought of your aunt strikes terror in my heart."

Sarah grinned. Only her fear of Beulah's barging in finally drove her to the kitchen to put on the coffee. As she headed back down the hall, Allen came

out of the bathroom. He kissed her gently. "Go shower and dress, woman."

When Sarah returned to the kitchen, Allen had put scrambled eggs and toast on the table. Clyde was noisily consuming a healthy serving of eggs from his bowl. They sat down and Sarah devoured her eggs, thinking nothing had ever tasted so good. Together they took fresh coffee out and sat on the screened-in porch.

Sarah sighed. "That was a wonderful breakfast. Thank you."

"You're more than welcome, love. I saw your whippoorwill. It's beautiful."

She turned and gave him a smile, noticing for the first time a beeper clipped to his pants pocket, a small reminder of what he did for a living.

That reminded her of Beulah's story. "Oh, Beulah told me yesterday that some man had called her and told her he was going back on Eugene's bond or something. She wasn't too clear on it. I knew it couldn't have been you." Sarah saw Allen's body tense and felt a finger of fear touch her. "It *wasn't* you, was it?"

"No. Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

"What is it, Allen?"

"Nothing. I'll take care of it," he repeated. Allen knew he should tell her that the call meant his father must have revoked the bond and that now he would have to take Eugene in. But as his eyes caressed the woman he loved, her face still flushed with sleep and happiness, he knew he couldn't. Yet he knew he had to prepare her. "Sarah," he said gently, "I really may have to take Eugene in."

Sarah tensed. "I know, Allen. Eugene knows the consequences of his behavior. It's okay."

He sensed that she had come to terms with the possibility on an intellectual level, but not on an emotional one. "Listen—oh, never mind. It's a long story, and I'll explain it all tomorrow." He just wasn't about to ruin their morning. What he

would ruin instead was the revocation of the bond—even if he had to lock Gilbert in the closet for the duration. "What would you like to do now?" he asked, adding, "I have to head back soon."

Sarah pushed aside her doubts. There's not a whole lot to do around here."

He stood, pulling her up with him, and kissed her with growing desire. "I can think of one way to kill some time."

The specter of Aunt Beulah loomed before Sarah. "Think of something else." As thoughts of Beulah faded with his insistent kisses, she slid her hand inside his shirt. Just then they both heard the screech of tires and a loud horn blaring. Sarah jumped. "Good Lord, it must be an invasion."

Sarah saw Charlene's figure through the screen door and stopped dead. She'd been filling in Charlene about her life over the telephone, but she'd carefully edited out her deepening feelings for Allen.

Sarah went forward to meet her, wishing she could vanish. "Hi."

Charlene's gaze went straight to Allen, then flicked in Sarah's direction. "Well, I hope I didn't interrupt anything—like a spider hunt or something equally exciting. You country people do have some interesting pastimes."

Sarah reddened. "Charlene, Allen. Allen, Charlene."

Charlene stepped closer. "Charlene Caski."

"Allen Ames. Well, I need to be running along. Nice to meet you, Charlene." He winked at Sarah. "Talk to you later."

"Don't leave on my account, Allen. I just thought I'd better check on Sarah and make sure she's really all right. Apparently, she's in good hands."

"No, it's all right, I have things to do. See you later." Allen smiled and made a hurried exit.

Sarah looked at the wicked grin on her

friend's face and sighed, knowing the look of the Grand Inquisitor when she saw it. "As you can see, Charlene, I'm fine," she said, trying to ward off the interrogation.

Charlene went inside and flopped onto the sofa, causing loud sounds of protest from Clyde. Charlene ignored this, intent on her victim, who had disappeared into the kitchen. "Sarah, I'm dying of curiosity."

Sarah busied herself with coffee, but finally she had to return to the living room.

"Sarah, I've been snooping. The only bail bondsman in Harrison is Gilbert Ames, who happens to live next door to a friend of a friend. He's in his sixties, and he has one son—your Allen."

"So?" Sarah felt uneasiness spread over her like a smothering blanket. "Why shouldn't Allen work for his father? He's also a real-estate broker."

"Oh." Suddenly Charlene heaved herself off the sofa. "Well, he's gorgeous, and the two of you are obviously in love. Let me know when the wedding is."

"Charlene, why are you rushing off?" She knew her friend well enough to realize that, for some reason, Charlene didn't want to discuss Allen or his business any further, and she uneasily wondered why.

"I have to get back in time for my next class. I'll call you later." Sarah watched Charlene's old Lincoln lumber out of the drive, trying to push aside the confusion and uncertainty crowding in on her.

Surely Allen wouldn't take her father in just to please his own father? If that was the case, then Allen had misled her with talk of doing his job. It wasn't really his job if his father was the real bail bondsman. And that led to the big question—if Allen didn't care whether Eugene went back to jail, how could he care for her, knowing she intended to protect Eugene?

All the while Allen was gone, Sarah sat and worried, telling herself over and over

that Allen would explain. But by the time she heard Allen's car in the drive, she was beyond accepting any explanations. She didn't want to hear what he had to say, because she had convinced herself that he would honor his father's wishes before hers. She walked out on the porch as he started up the steps. "What do you want?"

Allen's smile faded and his eyes closed briefly. He knew from the look on her face that Charlene had told her something about him. "What did she tell you?"

Sarah shrugged. "Only that you apparently are not a bail bondsman. You just do the dirty work for your father." Sarah leaned against the house, trying to ward off the feelings threatening to overwhelm her.

He started toward her. "Do you believe that?"

"Why not?" Her anger and hurt welled up. "You sail in here trying to convince me you're only doing what you have to do—drag my father off to jail—but it's not even your business. I suppose you thought seducing me was easier than tramping around in the woods looking for Eugene." Sarah hated the words even as she said them, but couldn't stop. "You should have told me."

"Sarah, I know that. You surely don't believe that I would have taken Eugene to jail?"

"That's what you said this morning, and like a ninny, I told you that I understood. What I understood was that you had a job to do, and it was out of your hands. What I understand now is that it never was *in* your hands—you're just trying to please your father."

"Sarah, where do you think I've been? I finally told Dad I wouldn't, couldn't do it. It's okay now."

But Sarah wasn't listening; she struck out like a wounded animal. "Your father's obviously more important to you than I am. Well, maybe Eugene's more impor-

tant to me than you are."

Allen's voice was quiet. "I told you he had a heart attack. I almost lost him. He thought Eugene was the biggest case he'd ever have, and I was trying to keep him quiet so he wouldn't have another attack." He reached a hand toward her. "Sarah, I love you. I figured you'd get Eugene to the hearing and then none of it would matter."

"And you could forget about stupid little Sarah after your old man's ten grand was safe and sound?" She wanted to relent, but couldn't. The pain deep inside her demanded satisfaction. "Just go away." She stared toward the woods.

Allen stared at her. "You know what I think, Sarah Branscum? I think you're making a mountain out of a molehill. It's your damned self-confidence that's the problem, not me, or my father. You've managed to convince yourself I was using you, just on the thousand to one chance it might be true."

His shot hit home. Was she really that insecure? She turned away. She had to have time to think. "Well, I guess you don't want to have any more to do with me then." She ran inside and slammed the door, tears welling up as she leaned against it.

Allen pounded on the door. "You're not getting rid of me that easily, Sarah. I love you and I'm going to marry you, whether you cooperate or not," he yelled through the door. "But I'm tired of all this mule-headedness. When you realize that you love me, too, and are ready to forget this foolishness, call me." A few moments later, the car door slammed and he drove off.

Three days had passed since Sarah's life had fallen apart. In three days, she had finished weeding the flower beds, mowed the lawn, cleaned the house again, and started painting the front of the house. All she'd managed to accomplish was to ex-

Look closely and you can see the scars.



Ad Council
A Public Service of
the Publication

There are no bruises.
And no broken bones.
She seems the picture of the perfect child.
But if you look closely you can see how
action, fear and constant humiliation have
scars that have tragically affected her
childhood.

So now only a shattered spirit remains.
And the light of laughter has gone out.
Remember that words hit as hard as a fist.
So watch what you say.
You don't have to lift a hand to hurt your
child.

Take time out. Don't take it out on your kid.



Write: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, Box 2866E, Chicago, IL 60690

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

haust herself. Even exhausted, she hardly slept. She wanted to call Allen, but couldn't swallow her pride. Mostly, she couldn't stand the possibility that she'd screwed up:

Halfway through, the second peeling window frame, it started to rain on her beautiful paint job. The day dragged by in a blur of gray, dreary rain. Sarah thought it fitted her mood perfectly. As she fixed herself a sandwich, something banged on the back door.

Sarah opened the door to a pitiful, be-draggled Clyde. He looked like a drowned rat. "Oh, Clyde, you poor thing." She scooped him up and towed him off, then warmed some milk for him. She'd never thought she would be glad to see something as pitiful as Clyde, but she was. As she sat down to her sandwich, a clap of thunder shook the little house and the lights blinked.

Sarah had never been bothered by storms, but spring storms in the mountains could be frightening even to the stoutest heart. She flipped on the radio and heard a crackling voice. "The National Weather Service in North Little Rock has issued a flash flood warning for the following counties in northern Arkansas: Madison, Carroll, Newton, Boone, and Searcy. Persons in low-lying areas should be prepared to move to higher ground. Stay tuned to this station for further weather bulletins."

Sarah listened to the soft music that replaced the voice, wondering how she could have ignored the fact that it had been raining all day. She had been so consumed with herself, she hadn't considered the consequences of the weather. Something nagged at the back of her mind. Suddenly, her body tensed. Rain—flash flooding—Eugene. Sarah jumped up, fear and panic already clutching at her. Eugene was camped on that damn creek. She reached for the telephone to call the sher-

iff. But the sheriff and all his deputies were out on storm-related calls, so Sarah left a message.

She racked her brain trying to think of potential rescuers. Clarence? He would come but he was no spring chicken. Eugene's cronies fell into the same category. In final desperation, she called Allen. Of course he was out.

Sarah knew she would have to go alone. She wasn't sure she could do anything, but she had to try, and there was no time to lose. She couldn't let Eugene drown all by himself in the middle of nowhere. Hot tears ran down her face, and her hand shook as she tried to pour coffee into a thermos.

Sarah loaded flashlights, blankets, hot coffee, and all the rope she'd been able to find into her Volkswagen, berating herself for the millionth time for having mooned around all day and hardly noticed the rain.

Her yellow slicker pulled down tight, she walked out the door with the last load. She maneuvered it into the car and slammed the door, then started the engine.

She fought to keep the car on the road, her panic nearing hysteria as she crossed one creek and saw the wild, muddy waters lapping at the bridge.

She drove as far as she dared up the logging road, ignoring the branches that slapped viciously against the windshield. She parked and began dragging supplies from the car. The wind howled, and when something touched her shoulder, she whirled around, fear clawing at her heart. Allen stood in front of her, water soaking his hair and dripping down his face.

"What in the hell are you trying to do?" The words were angry, but his voice was soft as he started pulling ropes from the car.

"It's Eugene." Her tears mixed with the rain.

"I know. Why didn't you call?"

"I did. You weren't there. Allen, I

DID YOU MISS ANY BACK ISSUES?



NOW AVAILABLE BY MAIL!

Back issue supplies of 5 GREAT ROMANCES, WORLD'S GREATEST LOVE STORIES and LOVE TREASURES are limited. When sold out they will not be reprinted. NOW is the time to fill your collection with issues you missed while they still last. Simply check the issues you wish to order in the coupon below. Enclose \$2.00 for each issue then add 50¢ to the total to cover postage and handling.

Every issue contains 5 romances filled with love, romance excitement and great reading pleasure. Be sure you own every back issue to make your collection complete.

DIGEST PUBLISHING, INC., 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024.

Please send me the following back issues: (check issues desired)

5 GREAT ROMANCES

- ☐ MAY-JUN 84
- ☐ MAR-APR 85
- ☐ JUL-AUG 85
- ☐ SEP-OCT 85
- ☐ NOV-DEC 85
- ☐ MAR-APR 86
- ☐ MAY-JUN 86

WORLD'S GREATEST LOVE STORIES

- ☐ MAY-JUN 84
- ☐ MAY-JUN 85
- ☐ SEP-OCT 85
- ☐ NOV-DEC 85
- ☐ MAR-APR 86
- ☐ NOV-DEC 86

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought—

"Later. We've got to get Eugene."

By the time they got to the end of the logging road, the peaceful little creek Sarah had stepped across a few days before was a raging torrent. Most of Eugene's camp had been washed away.

Sarah began to fear they were too late, "Eugene? It's Sarah!" The shrill panic in her voice carried over the swollen thundering waters.

She started toward the creek, but Allen restrained her firmly. When she felt him rumble with laughter, she followed Allen's pointing finger. Eugene was perched with his still on a boulder above the water, peeking out from under an old tarp.

"I been wonderin' when somebody'd come. Sarruth, honey, you got to help me save my still."

Sarah slumped against Allen, relief at finding her father alive washing away the hysteria and tears. "Leave it to Eugene to think about the damn still first."

Allen laid out the ropes and stripped to his briefs. "This is not going to be easy." He walked to the edge of the torrent. "Eugene, is there anything you can tie this to?" he yelled.

"You get it over here, young feller, and I'll find somethin' to tie 'er to." On the third try, Eugene snagged the rope coil, then secured it to the base of a scrub cedar tree. Allen tied his end to a sturdy oak, along with the end of another rope. The second rope he tied around his waist. "If I lose the main rope, try to pull me in, okay?" he said to Sarah.

Before Sarah could respond, he was in the water, the muscles in his arms bulging with the effort to hang on to the rope. She paced the bank and watched Allen's agonizingly slow progress.

She finally breathed easily when she saw Eugene pull him on to the boulder. Allen slumped in the rain, chest heaving with his effort. With a sinking feeling,

Sarah realized Eugene couldn't possibly make that kind of effort. And Sarah had come to realize she loved her father very much. Both the men she loved could be swept away from her in the next few minutes, and she hadn't told them she loved them.

She cupped her hands and shouted over the wind and the noise of the water. "I love you, Allen. I love you, Daddy." She couldn't tell if they'd heard or not. They seemed to be arguing about something. As she watched, Eugene pointed to his still. But Allen shook his head as he tied the safety rope around Eugene, then knotted it around himself.

Sarah watched in horror as they entered the water. A treetop swept toward them, tangled in the rope, and swung crazily at them before the current ripped it away again. Allen yanked Eugene back just in time to keep him from going with the tree.

Sarah could see by Eugene's drawn face that he was reaching exhaustion before they were even halfway across. "Daddy, hang on," she shouted. "Please hang on."

Above the noise of the storm she heard a vehicle lumbering up the logging road, and ran to meet it. A jeep pulled to a stop and the sheriff and another man got out. Quickly surveying the scene, the other man untied the safety rope from the oak tree and attached it to the winch on the jeep, then started exerting a gentle pressure.

Allen waved, and the winch speed increased. The winch screamed at full power as Allen struggled to keep himself and Eugene above the raging torrent. Sarah ran into the water and reached toward the two men. Finally, she got hold of Eugene's sleeve and tugged. Rapidly the sheriff pulled the exhausted men from the water, and Sarah collapsed beside them.

She hugged them both, her tears of joy running freely. "I love you, Daddy, I love

you, Allen." On shaky legs, she busied herself with blankets and hot coffee.

Eugene coughed out water, breathing heavily as he nodded. "I know, honey, I love you, too." He looked back across the creek just in time to see the copper still teeter, then topple into the current. "Damn! That was the best rig I ever had."

Allen shook his head unbelievably. "He wanted me to bring the still over first, then him."

The sheriff rumbled with laughter and tipped his cap to Sarah. "Ma'am, I reckon if this old goat hasn't learned anything today, jail ain't gonna teach him much." His eyes twinkled. "Can't seem to remember what I did with his other still, and with the latest evidence gone—well, I reckon we'll just have to drop the charges." He shook a finger at Eugene. "But I won't forget the next time."

Impulsively, Sarah hugged the sheriff. "Tell your wife she'll get her whippoorwill."

"She'd sure like that a lot. Well, we got other fools messin' around out in this rain we got to see about."

As the shivering men sipped the hot coffee, Sarah tried to explain to Eugene who Allen was.

Eugene cackled. "Well, now. If you young-uns are gonna get hitched, you'd best do it quick. This young feller appears a mite too eager to me—runnin' around after my daughter in them fancy drawers."

Sarah reddened and urged them toward the car. Now that she had time to wonder about Allen's sudden arrival, she suddenly wasn't sure whether he had come to see her or to rescue his father's investment. She was quiet as they piled into Allen's car, leaving Sarah's Volkswagen to be picked up later. Sarah finally broke the silence. "Turn right on the first road."

"Now, Sarruth, honey, you wouldn't."

"Oh, yes, I would." She looked at Allen's raised eyebrows. "Beulah's place is

a lot closer than ours, and we've got to get him out of those wet clothes."

Eugene groaned. "Please, Sarruth, anything but that."

"You've earned it, Eugene, and you're going to get it. A night with Beulah and Clarence won't make us even, but it'll go a long way toward it."

Beulah had the door open before Allen managed to drag Eugene from the car. Sarah's explanation was brief and to the point, and Beulah took over with her usual authority. They almost relented as they got a last glimpse of Eugene's woebegone face, but Sarah resolutely turned away and they climbed back into the car.

Now that they were finally alone, she wasn't sure what to say. She glanced sideways, noting the lines of strain still etched on Allen's face. "Allen, I was going to call, but . . ."

He smiled, his hand reaching out to squeeze hers. "Let's go home. We can talk later."

Sarah sighed. She knew from his tone of voice that he'd come back for her—not his business. She squeezed his hand in return and felt the familiar warmth replace the chill. "We need to get you dry."

"And warm. Any suggestions?" He pulled into the drive and helped her out of the car.

Sarah peeled off her slicker on the porch. "You get in the shower first."

Allen deposited his wet blanket beside the slicker. "Why don't we go together?" He led her to the bathroom and slowly undressed her. "Didn't I hear you say something about love back on the bank of the creek? Or was it just your standard line to a drowning man?" he teased.

Sarah threw herself into his arms. "I do love you."

They stood in the shower and Sarah, water running down her face, talked non-stop. Everything tumbled out—her fears, her doubts. When she was through, he

kissed her, gently at first, then with an urgency she returned.

"I know all that," he murmured as he turned off the water. "Now show me you love me."

Somewhat later, Sarah and Allen sat on the sofa, warm and satisfied. Sarah sipped coffee. "I'm sorry I didn't call." She still felt the need to justify her actions.

"I was going to give you one week, then come kidnap you," Allen confessed. "I almost went crazy when I thought I'd lost you. If our fathers have felt the loss of their wives as much as I felt your loss, I understand them both a lot better than I did."

"I guess I do, too."

"And if their grief is at the bottom of their peculiarities, then I think we should

just let them do whatever makes them happy." He nibbled at her ear.

"Maybe they could learn to fish." She tickled his stomach. "But you don't know how obstinate Eugene is."

"I do know. And you're just as stubborn as your daddy. And my daddy. That's why you didn't call. I worry about our children, Sarah Branscum. They'll be pure Missouri mule." His kisses trailed down her cheek.

Sarah snuggled closer. "Children? We're not even married yet."

"Oh, I plan to remedy that very soon but we could practice, couldn't we?"

Her response was lost as their passion started them on another magical ride to the stars. ♥



Beautiful Buy!
Thousands Sold at \$48.00

NOW ONLY
\$19⁹⁵

**SOFT LUXURIOUS COTTON...
DAZZLING BY DAY OR NIGHT**

**NOW AVAILABLE IN
EXTRA LARGE SIZES**

New Leaf Sweater



Sweet Sensation

- Leaf Applique Shoulders ○ Hand-Crocheted
Sleeves ○ Shimmering 'Pearl' Beading

Fresh and lovely as the rustling new leaves of Spring...or the rich, multi-colorful leaves of Autumn. A wonderful fashion find to wear day or night all year 'round. Very versatile, and easy to care for—It's soft, sumptuous pure Ramie Cotton. A superb value from Premiere Editions at only \$19.95 (Save \$\$—Was a bestseller at \$48.00.)

Leafy appliques, in hues of Wheat, Oatmeal, Blue and Pink, give it today's 'big shoulder' look. The lacy sleeves are hand crocheted...Handfuls of faux pearls cascade down the front. A premium-quality import in White/Multi Ramie cotton. Sizes S(4-6), M(8-10), L(12-14), XL(16-18), 2X(20-22), 3X(24-26).

Money-Back Guarantee Loveliest sweater of the year...or return in 30 days for full refund of purchase price (except ship. & hdg.). Our policy is to process all orders promptly. We charge your credit card only when order is shipped. Delays notified promptly. Shipment guaranteed within 60 days.

—SATISFACTION GUARANTEED—MAIL TODAY!

Premiere Editions®, Dept. LPM-8172
Bldg. #13, Hanover, PA 17333

YES! Kindly rush _____ New Leaf Sweater(s) (M204289A) in

Size(s): _____

☐ One for only \$19.95 plus \$2.95 postage & handling.

☐ TWO for just \$38.00 plus \$3.75 postage & handling.

Encl. is \$ _____ (NV res. add sales tax)

CHARGE TO MY: ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard
☐ Discover Card ☐ American Express

Acct. No. _____

Exp. Date _____

Print Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State/Zip _____

© H.H.I., 1989

FOR INFORMATION ONLY: ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A SLIMMER WAISTLINE IS AS CLOSE AS YOUR PHONE.

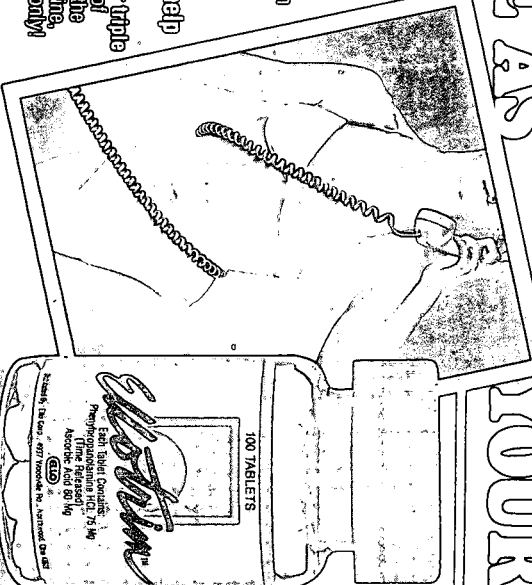
There are many ways to lose weight. But the easiest is to pick up a phone, dial our toll-free number, and order Elotrim™ Caffeine-free Diet Aids, the most effective appetite suppressant available without a prescription.

You can order exactly the type and strength you want, because you select from the wide variety shown here. That's something stores can't offer.

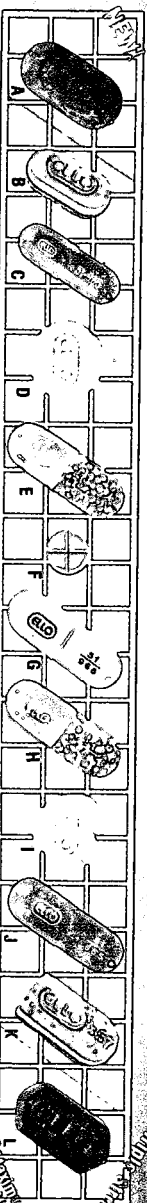
Call now. You have nothing to lose... except inches from your waistline!

12 popular types and strengths to help you lose weight fast!

...from a mild appetite suppressant to our triple strength diet aid containing a combination of ascorbic acid (a nutrition supplement) and the maximum legal limit of phenylpropionamine, a drug available previously by prescription only!



Caffeine-free Diet Aids with or without nutrition supplement



Use only as directed.
Tampacastan packaging.



Ello Corporation, 4937 Woodville Road, Northwood, Ohio 44130

©1985 Ello Corporation

Call TOLL-FREE 24 hours a day,
1-800-523-0732

In Ohio, 1-419-638-4019

Fast Delivery! Orders shipped within 24 hours. Satisfaction guaranteed or return within 10 days for a complete refund.

Order Now! 90 day supply only \$19.95 plus handling. Orders shipped C.O.D. by UPS. Or charge to Visa and Mastercard accepted.

\$2.00 Sample!

Get one of each Elotrim™ Diet Aid in a special sample pack. One pack per customer. Pre-paid only. Try it!

LICENSED TO UNICORP
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED